

OpenTheo

CCM and Church Music (with John Ahern)

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Alastair Roberts

John Ahern joins me to explore questions related to church music and Contemporary Christian Music (CCM).

The following are a selection of John's articles, if you would like to read more:

<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2020/04/contrapuntal-order>

<https://theopolisinstitute.com/theses-on-church-music-and-economics/>

<https://theopolisinstitute.com/conversations/secularity-and-the-problem-of-church-music/>

<https://theopolisinstitute.com/conversations/moving-past-musical-dystopia/>

I also reference Adam Neely's video on CCM, in which he discusses it in terms of the concept of 'musicking':

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hACUz4WVWwk&ab_channel=AdamNeely

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You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Hello and welcome. I'm joined today by my good friend, John Ahern, who's a musicology PhD student in Princeton. He has taught for the Theopolis Institute and also written for *Advantis*.

Thank you very much for joining me. It's a pleasure to be on a podcast that I listen to on

a practically regular, I mean, practically daily basis. So I've invited you to discuss the subject of music and particularly what is good music within church.

So first of all, to kick us off, why is music a part of Christian worship in the first place? What purpose does it serve? Well, that's a great question. I mean, let me caveat first by saying that I am, I always say this, I'm a theological lightweight. I really, I don't know anything about theology.

I don't have any official theological training. My training is actually as a historian. So, I mean, I can kind of give you the historical answers that I like the most.

I mean, the first one would just simply be that Christian worship heavily prioritizes music by virtue of prioritizing prayer. I mean, if worship is most fundamentally an act of prayer, then to pretty much any pre-modern person, that would inherently mean that it is also an act of music. Those two things in almost every culture, ancient culture, are intimately connected.

Connected in similar ways to the way that music is in ancient cultures, a kind of dispersed concept, more so than now. Like, for instance, I was recently rereading Plato's Republic and he famously describes education as two things, gymnastics for the body and music for the soul. And in the category of music in Greek, he would include, you know, yeah, prayer, rhetoric, poetry, storytelling, you know, many of these different categories.

And what those all maybe seem to have in common is is an attention to the way that words sound rather than simply what they mean. And as that is a concern of prayer as well, that seems to naturally bring music to it. But then, in addition to that, of course, distinctively in the way that the Bible portrays prayer, it does seem to consider music and poetry to naturally be a part of prayer.

You know, obviously there are the classic proof texts here, not least of which would be Paul in Ephesians 5 and in Colossians 3, the way he emphasizes Christian communication with one another, speaking to one another as an act of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs and using rather technical musical language in the process. Maybe one other thing to mention is that in the more medieval period, perhaps influenced by neoplatonism, one of my favorite answers to this question, why music, is it's felt that music is a way of assimilating the church militant to the church triumphant. In other words, what the church, the way that the church triumphant operates in heaven, in the sort of perfect new heavens and new earth, is this glorious polyphony of the many different choruses of Revelation 4 and 5. And that when the church on earth in the sort of present age does its music, its music is a reflection of that kind of glorious polyphony that were ushered into in the act of worship.

So music is a way of ushering us into the heavenlies, it's a way of us becoming more and

more like the church triumphant. So you mentioned the way that there is some sort of affinity between music and the word in that the word, the way that the word sounds is connected to music and we tend to focus upon what the word means, but there's this other aspect to the word. And I'd be curious to see some of the ways that we can integrate that insight into our understanding of the church's song.

How does the song of the church, the music of the church, elevate its word character? Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, there are there are various directions that you'd go with that question. Since I know ahead of time that you're looking to get us in a kind of direction where we talk about CCM, contemporary Christian music, one of the most important respects in which word and music interact with each other is at the level of what we might describe as musical form.

So if you have a text and let's say it's a biblical text and you want to sing that biblical text, I'll take off the top of my head the Magnificat, Mary's song. That as a text of poetry constrains how the music will materialize. So, for instance, if you have a kind of, if you've chosen ahead of time, a musical idiom that prioritizes a great deal of repetition that also prioritizes certain predetermined musical formats like, for instance, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, something like that.

It'll turn out that approaching Mary's Magnificat is an almost impossible task. And this might actually be true also if you choose a hymn. It's as your typical format where a hymn is sort of a four phrase piece of music and it has an extremely rigid metrical structure and it strophes the poetry, which means that it cuts it up into these bits and then they repeat over and over.

So both of those formats are actually going to approach Mary's Magnificat fairly awkwardly and for a variety of reasons. Number one, Mary's Magnificat is rather long, so you have to get through a great deal of text and particularly for that kind of pop music format of verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus. That's very good at getting through maybe, you know, four lines of poetry, but it's not very good for getting through however many Magnificat is, 20 or so.

And another thing that both of those things, the hymn, the traditional hymn, and the more pop chorus format are bad at is when the emotional mood changes. Like they tend to be sort of one mood per song bits, but if you've got an opening section that is Mary magnifying the Lord and then you've got another section about tearing down the mighty from their thrones and filling the hungry with good things and so forth. Those are different emotional tenors and it turns out that that is not going to sit easily with those two musical approaches.

So all of that to say that that the biblical texts that we are actually asked to sing, both asked to sing by the Bible itself and also we are asked to sing by the kind of normed norm of tradition, those texts will end up rubbing up against our predetermined musical

forms and asking things of those forms that the forms aren't going to be very good at. And that's when somebody like me comes along and says, well, historically, there's a much richer slate of options, musically speaking, than these two sort of narrow options that we are oftentimes presented with and we need to explore those options if we're going to faithfully sing the texts of the Bible. Does that answer your question? I sort of went off on a tangent.

In part, what you're talking about is very much the relationship between the text and the music and the ways that the text places certain demands upon music if it's going to be faithful to it. I'd be curious beyond that to talk about some of the ways in which the church is a community formed by its collective song. So music isn't just something that relates to its text, it also relates to its performers and the ways that a particular musical piece is performed creates relations among persons, whether that's between an audience and the performers upon stage, whether it's a soloist performing a piece or whether it's a gathering of musicians improvising together, whatever it is, there seems to be a further communal aspect of music that music is one of the things that most brings us together as communities and it seems that's one of the purposes that it does serve within the life of the church.

How can that inform the ways that we choose music and make decisions between the sorts of music that we perform and how we do so? Right, right. That's a great question. So absolutely.

And I think that what I was talking about that old notion of music being a reflection of heaven and music making the church militant like the church triumphant, that sort of presupposes certain things. I mean, this is something I've talked about an awful lot. It's sort of a hobby horse of mine, but the way that a lot of music now assumes that the basic act of music composition is that you start with a melody and then subsequently you add a whole bunch of chords underneath that melody.

And what a lot of people don't realize is that that itself is a reflection of a certain mode of production of music. And that mode of production of music presupposes that music is number one, it's one person sort of primarily responsible for making the melody. It's a sort of soloist or group of soloist activity.

And then underneath that there's a kind of one could even describe it as like proletarian perfunctory activity of providing accompaniment, providing chords. And though that's a textural layer of the music, which on its own would not be interesting enough to support listening. But, you know, it provides this kind of background for the main melody.

And then that whole unit itself stands in relation to a kind of assumed audience, which ends up meaning that that musical decision to approach music in this way with one melody and a whole bunch of chords underneath presupposes a whole economy of music where there are the performers amongst whom there's this division of like the soloist

and the accompanist. And then there is a listening audience which receives the music and is not actively itself participating in the music. Whereas alternative models of music might be everyone sings the same melody and that might strike us as boring.

But I mean, you know, for instance, if you go to a, I've heard this about the UK, that if you go to a sports game in the UK, you'll hear men very loudly chanting or singing together in unison. No one finds that boring. That's awesome.

That's a reflection of, I mean, it is, of course, a reflection of unity. And that's what's great about the sort of Protestant hymn. That's what was felt in the Reformation to be great about the Protestant hymn is that there was this everyone is uniting around a single melody.

Or you could have a model of music where people are able to sing multiple different melodies, which is what we call polyphony or counterpoint. And that itself is this glorious model where there are these competing musical demands and they have to be balanced out by a certain set of rules or like a set of gameplay rules that govern how much autonomy each melody gets. And that is, that, on the other hand, presupposes a model of musical economy in which everyone is a participant.

And there's not this, let's say, consumerist model that we're preparing this music in a studio in order to deliver it to listeners who are going to be passive recipients of it. And if you, of course, I mean, I barely even need to ask the question, but if you ask which model fits best with church music as sort of the Bible would dictate it, I think it's pretty clear that it would have to be the unison model or the polyphony model. But there's something I think inherently wrong about that model that demands one single melody and a whole bunch of chords underneath because you're, this is not coincidentally a model that's arisen more lately in sort of post-industrial society and it's suited to that post-industrial economy, but it doesn't turn out to be very suited to speaking to one another with psalm tymphs and spiritual songs.

Is that sort of more the direction you were thinking of? Yes. Beyond that, I'd be interested to hear your thoughts about how church music answers to the strong demands that people bring to it, where music is integral to people's identity. Their preferred musical styles, the sorts of music that they consume.

How can a church square those sorts of demands, which to some extent, if they don't answer those, the people are just going to go elsewhere, and the need to form people into a different form of music that we could enjoy in unison and perform in unison. Interesting. So are you talking about a situation which a congregant is, feels an affinity to the particular song that they want and they're just not going to go with anything else? Is that what you mean? More generally, where every congregant has their own preferred musical styles that they will prefer over others, and so a church that caters to those styles will be one that they'll prefer over a church that doesn't.

And that is a very, practically, it's a very strong demand that limits the flexibility that many churches feel when it comes to developing the church's song. Yes. Yeah, I think you're right.

I think there's an inherent bias in church music selection. The sort of average music that you choose on a given Sunday, there's a bias toward the path of least resistance. You know, one thing that smart galaxy brain church musicians like me seldom think about is, that was supposed to be a self-deprecating remark.

I'm saying that we're often too busy thinking about high minded matters to realize that probably most of the battle with respect to church music is fought when, well, the battle's already over, given the fact that most congregants go into church already super familiar with the average contemporary Christian music song. Because they've heard it on the radio, in the car, or they just, you know, have it on Spotify or on whatever their preferred streaming platform is. You know, whereas most people don't just know hymns and especially if you are trying to create a church music program ex nihilo, if you're trying to create a church music program based on music that's going to likely be unfamiliar to everyone there, there's an immense amount of inertia, given that people are familiar with the tunes, you know, the Matt Redman, Chris Tomlin tunes, when they walk in the doors of church.

They've heard it throughout the week and they know that already. But they're not familiar with Claude Gounamel or whatever deep cut from the 18th century you're going for or whatever. And as a consequence, I think that that's a practically insurmountable task.

I mean, it's one thing if you're a church musician, but if you're just a pastor trying to justify your decisions to the average congregant, that's a tough sell. You're asking a lot from your congregation and, you know, unless church music is one of your biggest priorities, you're not necessarily going to want to kind of stake your pastoral ethos on an issue like that that feels more like adiaphora or prudential. So I think that ends up meaning that even pastors who feel that there's something greatly lacking in CCM are hardly ever going to make that hill to die on, just because there's, like I said, there's that natural inertia that comes from the consumer choice being on the side of CCM very strongly.

So you've touched upon this to an extent so far. Could you say more about the criteria that you believe good church music should be judged by? Yeah, I think what I already said about how it has to be formed by the needs of the particular texts that you're doing. And I think that one of the tasks of Christian worship is just simply to make the Psalms and Canicles so memorized is not even strong enough a word, just so deeply in the bones of every congregant that the material of Psalms and Canicles feels like it's constantly with us and constantly present throughout the week.

I think that's one of the most important tasks of worship is just that active catechizing people into the songs of the church, the songs of the Bible. And so whatever musical choice you make needs to sort of be in service of that fundamental task. I think that's why it's incomprehensible to some people that chant, you know, not necessarily Gregorian chant, but some kind of chant, Anglican chant, Lutheran chant, etc.

It's incomprehensible to some people why that would be still on the table in the year 2022. But it turns out that there's very little music that's better at that simple thing of getting these canicles or Psalms deeply internalized within you. You mentioned the experience at a football game.

I mean, it's essentially chant that's taking place there of some kind. That's right. And it's important to remember that chant as a term is a very recent word.

I think that if you look up in the Oxford English Dictionary, the word chant simply meant it was identical to melody or song before about the year 1750. It's only after that time when it began to peel off and mean like this style of singing that doesn't have meter or pulse and in which you just sort of like say the words to a note. It turns out that that was the vast majority of everybody's musical experience before this time and that if you were to draw an analog to what is most similar to chant nowadays actually hip hop would be very similar to chant.

If you ask a classicist or a medievalist, what would Homer or the Song of Roland have sounded like? They will all to a man tell you that probably R&B or hip hop is the closest modern analog. So these are just forms of music where you're prioritizing the textual concerns over musical concerns and that's sort of the basic reasoning for chant. But now I've lost the thread of what your question was.

Oh, criteria of music. Yeah. Yeah, that would be one.

What we already talked about and these decisions about how you format the music in terms of polyphony or monophony or these different types of concerns. I think there are subtle social implications, theological implications to those kinds of decisions. And then maybe a third one would just simply be that these are prudential matters.

I mean, many of these things are prudential matters. I'm not going to claim that there's one style of music which we should bind the conscience into doing. But when we make these decisions, we should have our eyes open about why it is that we like one style over another.

Like I think many people think to themselves, well, that needs no explanation why I like Hillsong or why I like Bach, St. Matthew Passion. Those are just my affinities that deserves no further examination or merits no further examination. But that's, of course, a naive way of how consumer choice works.

And we need to understand that a lot of our musical affinities are a consequence of consumer choice. And then many of the reasons that we like a certain kind of music are reasons which are not only theologically unformed, but they're many steps. They're completely unformed.

And in fact, they're determinations of people who do not have Christian worship in mind at all. I mean, the people who came up with the format of an average pop song and came up with the format of studio production of commercial recorded music, they did not have congregational singing in mind as a goal. And that doesn't necessarily disqualify CCM right out the gate, but it should at least cause us to take a step back and say, well, wait, what are the governing goals here in producing this music and are those goals compatible with Christian worship? And I think a lot of the time we'll discover that they're not.

So we've spoken a bit about some of these things on the side, but a lot of our modern culture of music is novel. It's something that has only existed in something like its current form for the period of time that we've had recorded music. And it seems to me that if we're going to understand the place that music plays within the modern church, we're going to struggle to do that without considering the dramatic shifts that have taken place in our culture of music more generally.

Could you speak to some of those? What are some of the most significant changes that you see that have changed the way that the church relates to its song? And how do you see churches going along with some of these changes in ways that may not be very reflective? Yeah, absolutely. It's a great question. First of all, I guess I should clarify, since I, my tendency is toward Luddite, you know, just all the technology changes were bad.

But I want to make it clear that I actually don't think that. I mean, for instance, the blessing of being able to print sheet music or recording technology that allows us to, for instance, make this podcast, those are blessings. Of course, they're blessings.

And it's not like we're going to turn the clock back. But like you say, we need to not just take them uncritically. You know, that these technological choices mold us in certain ways and so forth.

So yeah, the obvious one, if we sort of work backward chronologically, the obvious one would be around the turn of the century when recording technology, the 20th century, when recording technology became available. And then, you know, in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, when it really sort of was honed into a science, particularly for music. It's obvious, but it's worth contemplating it for a while.

If you want music in the year 1850, you have to make it yourself. You know, there's, you don't go turn on Spotify or the record player or whatever. If you want music, you make it

yourself.

People still wanted music and they did it as often as they could. There were whole cultures around how you can recreationally do music, you know, like the scenes in all those period dramas where the love interests are sitting next to each other on piano bench and playing a four-hand, you know, Schubert piece or whatever. That's totally real.

That really happened. That was the only way they could make music when they wanted music. And what that means is that there's a huge amount of literacy, musical literacy in a period like that.

A lot of people have a high level of music proficiency. There's not really this expectation that some people are born with musical talent and others are, you know, you know, infinitely tone deaf and will never be different. There's a high level of recreational amateur musical proficiency.

Music education is sort of assumed to be an important part of society since you don't have, it's not just such a common thing that you can expect it to be anywhere. And if you want some pleasant music in the background, you actually have to do it yourself. That's a profound difference and it's worth contemplating how that interacts with church music, which maybe we can in a bit.

Another one that's very important though is going back in time even further. It's the invention of the printing press and actually they didn't figure out how to do music printing until 1500. The printing press was closer to 1450, but music printing around 1500.

That's the first moment in history where people will start to become really interested in preserving musical pasts. I mean, they've always been sort of interested in that, but this idea that I, for instance, can think to myself, oh, what should we do for church this Sunday? Maybe I'll do a motet by Josquin or a mass by Palestrina. That's incomprehensible to anyone before like, you know, the year 1800 because keeping track of this music, archiving it, then deciding that maybe someone will be interested in it, so I'll reproduce it or print it or sell it or put it online or something like that.

That is actually something that is highly non-traditional. I say this just in case somebody thinks that I'm going to be bashing CCM for the rest of the podcast. Actually, there's a kind of traditionalism with respect to music that is highly non-traditional, that sort of assumes modern modes of technology, like, oh, I can go dig up a very random piece of music that they did in the year 1650.

But if you went back in time and talked to the person in 1650 and told them, oh, I did your motet in church this Sunday, they would think that was heinous and bizarre and

probably necrophilic or something like that. Like, why on earth would you do that? Just write your own church music. So there are two sides to this story, but you're absolutely right that the technological modes of production have a huge impact on church music decisions.

Beyond that, you've commented upon this in various contexts, the importance of the economics of our music and the way that that changes the way that we relate to music, more, for instance, as consumers than producers, and the ways in which the whole industry develops around it. Yeah, I mean, maybe this is what you're talking about. The one I always think about is I am aware of this because I've had to sit through in college and in grad school many music theory classes, which are very hated by most people.

But what they make you realize is that for instance, the top 40 chart is directly a consequence of some very canny, smart music producers who understand music theory, and they too had to sit through it in their college classes. And these music producers know exactly the kind of musical decisions which are going to make you buy the song and like the song, and then of course there's a return on investment on all the massive capital investment in that song. So that's why I want to bring attention to the economic side of it, because there's a kind of mysterious and almost magical thing that happens behind the song.

You hear the song and you just think to yourself, I really like how this song sounds. I had a friend who described it perfectly. He was listening to a song by Lorde and he was like, this is like weaponized pop.

And he's absolutely right. There are all these decisions down to like the chord structure, you know, and the sort of rhythmic pattern and how much reverb they use. I mean the reverb, which is that studio effect that you inorganically put, I mean studios are very dead spaces naturally when you record, but then the music producer with software patches will add all this reverb or echoey sound on to give it, you know, reverb has a very clear topological meaning in modern pop music, which is it makes me feel sort of mystical and like I'm out in outer space or there's a massive cathedral-like space around me and perhaps all these emotions I'm feeling have some greater significance.

I mean and it's funny how you can go to pop songs and find out the places where they use reverb and they don't use reverb and it's very clear that it signifies in some kind of way like that. Now the producer understands all these kinds of decisions and they know how to deploy these techniques in just the right way to affect the particular demographic that they're going for and that demographic they know will, you know, purchase the song on that basis. Now that's what I'm not saying to be clear is that that's also how CCM works.

It is how CCM works, but I don't think that CCM, I think a lot of CCM musicians and producers are very nice people and they're not trying to swindle anybody or just like

their whole goal isn't merely profit, but they are nonetheless using a mode of production which assumes that as its primary goal, whether or not they want that to be the primary goal. That is the kind of hierarchy of desire and hierarchy of priorities which are informing what musical decisions are being made and that I would say is deeply dissonant with the kinds of priorities which are involved in church music which are necessary and much more local. They're more concerned about participation of the priesthood of all believers.

They're much more concerned with, you know, obviously honoring God and honoring God through the through kind of submitting to the particular formats and exigencies of the scriptural text. So the same reason that you might have the sort of weaponized pop that you described in that Lorde song might be the reason why there's a sort of convergence upon the musical idiom of Coldplay or U2 in CCM. Right, absolutely.

And reverb, I think again, plays a huge role here. The other one that does is modality and it's difficult to describe what modality is in music, but harmonically speaking, there's major which sounds to us happy. It didn't always sound to every culture happy, but in 2022, major chords, you know, Do Mi Sol Mi Do, that sort of sound is very happy.

Whereas minor chords, I'm not a singer, sorry, but you know that that's a bit sadder sounding. So major and minor vaguely correspond to happy sad. Modes are these older style of scale which allow you to access kind of in between emotions and they became popular a bit in the 60s with the Beatles, but they really became popular in the 80s and 90s, particularly with like U2, Coldplay, that kind of alternative rock space.

And they're just perfect for that kind of feeling of I want a bit of pop, but I also want a bit of spirituality. And there's a reason why I think CCM has really imported the sound of those musicians and taken them to be the model because it does seem to have this rapprochement between the kitschy mass-produced sound and the sound that feels more worshipful, which is that buzzword you always hear in CCM circles. It'd be interesting to think about the backgrounds of those particular musicians because Coldplay, Chris Martin came from an evangelical background originally and U2 very much had a sort of Christian cult background in the early 80s and both of them have elements of Christian worship that seems to be wrapped up within their lyrics at various Viva la Vida, various points in there.

You can see all the Christian themes or 40 in U2, the use of the 40th Psalm. It seems that the influences can almost go both ways. Yes, they can and I think that there's that's another canny market demographic decision as well.

It should be pointed out. But the other one who sadly now I think completely fits into that category of ambiguous between Christian and non-Christian is Sufjan Stevens who had I think a very explicit beginning in CCM before he became a big deal. But then with his sort of standard albums he clearly has a lot of Christian influence which seems to be

getting less and less and incidentally, I think that that's also the trajectory of the quality of his music which is getting to my mind less and less interesting.

But it's the same set of things there. I think it but with Sufjan you add into the mixture this folksy sound and I always am keen to point this out that there's a folksy sound and then there's actual folk music, right? The whole point of actual folk music is that you're not letting anyone else do it. You're doing it yourself.

You know folk music is music which is made by the people in the room. It's impossible. It's like an actual performative contradiction to listen to folk music that has been mass-produced on an album.

That's the opposite of folk, right? It's commercial. But yet many artists are very good at importing folksy sounds which if I were to sort of take an Adorno spin on it I would say that folksy sound is perfect because it gives you the feeling that you are that it's folksy and that you're somehow involved in the production of the music but it therefore makes you feel like you don't need to be involved in the production of music. And that to me is the kind of devious thing about Sufjan is that he gives that folksy quality to it and you'll notice now in CCM everyone wants that.

It's the folksy pick pattern in the guitar and maybe a little less reverb and the raspy voices. That's like the currently fetishized thing. There was one other thing I was going to say on this topic.

Oh, yeah, and what I think is funny is that despite all this there are Christian artists out there who over the decades, they're like, hey guys, I'm Christian and they make very clearly music that reflects their Christian belief, but nobody takes them seriously as a model for CCM. I'm thinking of for instance, later Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan. Both of those guys for decades have claimed to be Christians, even though Christians are like, I don't know.

But nobody seriously thinks that they want CCM music to sound like either of those artists. There are even older artists who are CCM artists like I mean, who am I thinking of? Keith Green and there's Larry somebody and I can't believe I'm forgetting his name, but there are much older CCM artists who have this different style. It's not the jars of clay thing that emerged in the 90s.

It's this older style of music which sounds so dated. But again, it reflects that what we prioritize in our CCM sounds actually has very little to do with any inherent category theological decision or category liturgical hierarchy. It has everything to do with the kind of pop music sounds that most particularly speak to the demographic in mind.

So for the sake of our mutual friend Ansi, I have to ask you about Kanye. You know, I'm just going to plead ignorance on that. I don't have enough time to listen to everything.

And Kanye is just one of those guys that I barely listen to anything. I really like that in the bit that I have listened to, I really like his kind of neo soul gospel direction in recent albums. Those are neo soul gospel R&B.

Those are the genres that I sort of have a more natural affinity to, but I just I don't listen to that. I haven't listened to old Kanye. I barely listen to new Kanye.

So when people start getting discussions about what's the relative quality of more recent albums, I don't know. So sorry Ansi. I'm just gonna take a pass on that one.

So one video that you've recommended before that I found very helpful on thinking through some of these questions is something by Adam Neely on the subject of CCM as the music that he really hates and trying to get to the bottom of why he dislikes it. And one of the concepts that he explores in this larger exploration is that of musicking. And I thought it would be helpful for you to spend some time explaining that concept and why it might be important for our thinking about what constitutes good worship music.

Yes, and I'm trying to remember. Yes, it's a music. I've just googled it.

Sorry. There's a famous musicologist who came up with this term in I think the 90s. It was Christopher Small.

And to be completely frank, I have not read Christopher Small's book, but it's such a now it's become such a common term that you know, it doesn't really matter. But I think that in the 90s what his concern was when he came up with that term musicking was to get people out of the mode of thinking of music as primarily this formal thing either idealized in the score for like classical art music or for that matter idealized in the recording, the mp3 file, whatever for more pop music. And he felt that that was a reductive vision of what music is and he wanted to expand the kind of let's say ontological boundaries of music to include the behaviors that go along with music, the text that is impossible to divorce from the music, maybe the bodily dispositions of you know, dance or whatever or the lack of dance.

For instance, you know, it's absolutely central to classical musicking that people are there sitting in ties and nice evening wear and not moving their bodies at all until the end of the piece at which point they clap and perhaps vacate their seats. And that kind of bodily disposition is actually central to how the music operates. And he's quite right in those sorts of respects.

Similarly, I think also concerns of economics like what we've been talking about that these are all wrapped up in musicking and that musicking is a cultural practice that involves many many things and it's not just surely the notes themselves. So for instance the ways that performance of CTM will generally involve the singer at the front and is that the sort of thing that would come under musicking? Yeah, and you know, to be

honest, to be clear, I have played probably about equal parts CCM worship in my career as a church musician. I've done about equal parts CCM and traditional.

I'm not like it's not like against my conscience to do CCM. I usually do what I'm asked to do and I've done a lot of that. One of the things that I have noticed though about CCM, there are many CCM artists and CCM people who are trying to move away from the so-called me, I emphasis of CCM who want it to be more God-focused, want it to be easier for congregations to sing.

But despite that, you know, you can try your hardest but sometimes the music won't let you, right? I mean if this music was designed for certain cultural practices in certain cultural contexts and if you're choosing to use that idiom there are certain things that you're not really going to be able to fight against ultimately. In some ways, maybe the problem is that the central gravity of contemporary Christian music is not actually the congregational worship service. It's the radio playing or the private Spotify listening and then that's brought in, it's sort of replicated in some form within the worship service with the soloist at the front and the song is written for the solo performer and other people can sing along but it's not really written for the congregational singing that you'd usually have for a hymn, for instance.

Right, you're exactly right and you said the word replicate. That's I think crucial that the where is the church music if you had to point to it, where is it? It's on Spotify. It's not there on Sunday morning.

Sunday morning is a replication of the Spotify track. Whereas a hymn that you sing on Sunday morning worship is never thought of as a replication of Trinity Choir singing the hymn, right? The main thing is the hymn that you sing and it's sometimes nice to listen to a recording of a hymn. Right, whereas if I sing Our God is Greater or whatever that song is, you know by Chris Tomlin, whatever the title is, Our God, right? And if I sing that on Sunday morning in my church what everyone in the congregation thinks is oh, yeah, it's the Chris Tomlin song and when they hear your particular band doing it, they're hearing in their head the Chris Tomlin song and then they'll be disappointed that you don't sound exactly like that or whatever.

So basically you're competing with a thing which exists completely paralytically outside your church. That I think in itself is one of the big reasons that I'm not a big fan of CCM. But then what you have the artist who's producing this material as a solo group performance and then you're listening to that in private and then you have almost that attempt to replicate it which will create its own divide within the worship service with the performers at the front and then the congregation that has to sing along to a lesser degree.

Yeah, and it has to sing along with something that was designed for Chris Tomlin, right? And it turns out that if you just listen to if Chris Tomlin had made the melody just perfect

for congregational singing and not about himself, it turns out it would have been very boring to listen to, right? I mean, this is oftentimes the case that music that's really fun to sing is music that's quite boring to listen to. And similarly music that is very exciting to listen to is oftentimes impossible to sing, right? I mean, that's just a sort of like amateur professional, you know divide there. But that's why again if you make the choice to go with this idiom that is designed for studio production and for passive listening, no matter how hard you try it's going to give your congregation the short shrift when they attempt to sing it.

But you also keep talking about the soloist up front, you know something that you and I have mentioned before is that just on a kind of intuitive experiential perspective, experiential level, whenever I see a CCM band up front in church, it's uncanny how it's always attractive people singing up front. It's uncanny how that priority seems to know it. I mean, I'm sure that again, everyone has good motives and nobody's like got any perverse motives here, but it's weird.

Like why is that that it's always the sort of the attractive people, also the people who are good at moving their body, the people who are natural at a certain kind of way of expressing themselves bodily. Those are the people that get the job, get the role, you know, maybe not necessarily the ones who volunteer, but they're the ones who are chosen. And they're chosen, I think, because of a sort of subconscious bias of, well, this style of music accompanies a certain type of body, a certain type of bodily motion, and whether we're aware of that bias or not, I think it's going to be there.

It seems to me there's something along the lines of a sort of vicarious subjectivity that's expressed by the gifted vocalist who is able to represent our emotions in their most beautiful and elevated form. And it seems to explain in part why of all the people that people fixate upon as their stars and idols, they are predominantly musicians, and particularly singers, because singers represent something of the internal voice of the self. And for that reason, someone who sings beautifully and looks beautiful is someone that you feel can speak for you in a remarkable way.

They can give voice to your inner self in a way that you could not do yourself. And so within worship, you can almost replicate that sort of dynamic where you have the attractive and gifted vocalist who can almost give voice to the congregation vicariously, which is a different sort of dynamic from trying to elicit the congregation's own voice and have that as something that has an integrity of its own. That's a very good point.

And there's actually a famous essay by, I don't know, maybe you're thinking of it, a famous essay by Roland Barthes, who talks about this function of voice. Really, it's something that actually emerges distinctively in the West. Not all cultures have that sense that a person's voice when singing represents the subjectivity of the room in a way, especially the female soloist.

But that really emerges in opera. And it's funny that something... You have opinions about opera, if I remember. Yes, I do.

I do. But let's just point out that Cher and Beyoncé and Sandra McCracken, they all have in common what you noted, that kind of subtle infrastructure of the voice as a vicarious subjectivity that goes back to the emergence of opera in the 17th century. But that's neither here nor there.

I should point out that we're not necessarily describing something that is bad inherently or even bad in worship. But I think that it needs to be hierarchically much lower on the priority of worship than what you mentioned, which is eliciting from the congregation their own voices. If Peter Lighthouse were here, he would talk about how he would be ashamed that I didn't mention earlier that worship is very much... We're offering ourselves up as a living sacrifice.

In the Old Testament, they offered sacrifices and the aroma and the smoke and the sacrifice that had been burnt was rising up to God. At some point in the Old Testament, perhaps around the Davidic tabernacle, there seems to be a shift into thinking of music as itself an act of that sacrifice. When we lift up the voice in song, that is the ascent of the sacrifice going up into heaven and it's a sweet aroma to God.

Now in the New Covenant, that's completely how it works. We are the sacrifice. We offer ourselves up in song.

That's how we ascend. That's how our smoke goes up into heaven. That is a hugely important reason why everyone needs to be involved.

No one is exempt from church music. It's fine to have professionalism in church, but it is something that's super added. It's something that is... If we're ordering our loves as Augustine would have us, our first love has to be congregational singing.

Then you can have your choir and your fancy organ and maybe even your female vocalist after that. That needs to be the bread and butter. If we're choosing our musical idiom, in service of a goal in worship of having the professional soloist, that's putting our hierarchy of priorities upside down.

It does seem to me that many of these decisions are almost made for churches by the sort of consumer demands of the people in the pews. One of the things that we can maybe get into briefly is the way in which we've already talked a bit about how the music of the church is forming the sort of subjectivity of the congregation. It's also a work of sociology.

The challenge of the sociology of music, I think, is particularly pronounced with the ways that modern music, because of just the sheer variety of it, and the ways that we're not making it, we're mostly consuming it, leads to divisions along musical lines of musical

preference. You have divisions between generations, divisions between classes, divisions between levels of education, race, culture, all these sorts of things. How can the church be a place where we are coordinating the song in a way that's healing some of these and overcoming some of these divisions, rather than just playing into them or accentuating them? Yeah, that's a great question that honestly I have not really thought very much about.

One thing I want to be clear on is that I don't think that we should attempt to obliterate all heterogeneity in church music. Church music is, and always has been, non-Catholic. And if a Catholic is listening, I would say even Catholic music in the Middle Ages was non-Catholic.

I mean, there are certain, let's say, Catholic elements, by which I mean universal, right? I mean, there are certain universal elements that might hold true all places, but there's no one idiom that's going to work. Musical idiom is always going to be a consequence of the kind of vernacular region. It always has been and it always will be.

In a way, I think that the best play that a traditionalist church musician can make is to point out that actually CCM is the obliteration of the vernacular. It is in fact a way of robbing people of their own musical language and their own musical voice and imposing on them this kind of top-down approach where music producers are making all the musical decisions. And then you basically just get to choose with scarecrows what musical idiom you like.

I think that I can't tell you exactly how it should look, but I think that actually many parts of the Black American church do a good job of this. That there is an ancient idiom that they have going back to the 18th and 19th century that they have kept true to. It's morphed and it hasn't stayed the same always.

But if you walk into a Black church and the gospel music is amazing there, that's music that is genuinely being produced by all the people there. And there is a genuine harmony and polyphony which is present there from merely the people who are there and it's not this sort of mere shadow of the platonic ideal that exists on spot. It's also interesting to see the way that they incorporate music into preaching.

Yes, oh absolutely. And what I was saying earlier about rhetoric and oration and prayer and so forth all being sort of imbricated together. So I'm not prescribing one particular way of doing it, nor am I suggesting that church music should obliterate those kinds of distinctions.

I think that a good church music is going to balance the vernacular needs of particular people with certain standard priorities of Christian worship, which will be the same everywhere. And I do really think that the problem of CCM is not that it's too vernacular. It's that it's not vernacular at all.

So we talked a bit about the vernacular and the Catholic. Now we've used the word just as part of what we're discussing in CCM, contemporary. Just as we move towards a close, can you say how we should think about the contemporary traditional opposition? Should we just be traditional? Is there a way in which we're just going to have to choose one side of that opposition? Is the opposition a good one? The way you ask that question makes me feel like you know that I have an answer.

I know that you have strong opinions on several issues, John. Yeah, I don't think it's a good binary. It's in fact, as I said before, it's a binary between traditional and contemporary that other eras of church music history haven't had to choose.

They haven't had to choose one or the other. And again, I think we all know this cerebrally, but we aren't very good at reminding ourselves this, that when Bach wrote his cantata, BWV 66, he wrote that on an Easter morning, probably like 1720 or so. And the next Sunday he wrote a different cantata, and then the following Sunday he wrote a different cantata.

It never occurred to him, maybe I should go back to Heinrich Schutz 150 years ago and use some Heinrich Schutz in church. All that occurred to him was that he make his own. And there are ways of having continuity with the past.

He could use old Lutheran chorales, and those Lutheran chorales were Luther's translation of Latin Roman Rite Gregorian chants or Sarum chants. And you could trace a line musically all the way back, but yet there was something new. There was a great deal that was new every single Sunday.

That is, I think, healthy, and that's how it should look. But I think that there are conditions of possibility that exist in modernity that make that very difficult. So that we, it's difficult to even know what our vernacular is that we could appeal to, to use in our church music.

And, you know, if you're listening to this and you think, well, wait, John, what do you actually think we should do? What should we do? Should we do traditional or contemporary? The answer is we should do both, and actually there's nothing really on the market that maybe perfectly satisfies what I'm describing. I mean, there might be a few things, but what needs to sort of first happen is that we need to re-educate ourselves musically speaking and liturgically speaking. This is going to be a long multi-generational process.

I say that we have to have a 100-year vision, 100-year plan for church music. And I think it really begins with increasing music literacy, increasing the number of people who want to actually make music for themselves rather than relying on other people making it. It's, you know, singing folk songs to your kids.

It's having people over for music nights, having more psalm singing in your church, just enjoying congregational singing in your church, at your school, having a Kodai music program, starting a Suzuki music studio, etc. These are things that I think are what you need to have in place for 20, 30, 50 years before you can begin seeing the kind of fusion of contemporary and traditional that I think would be my ideal. But basically at this point, there's not really a silver bullet music option that I would point to as like, well, this is exactly what we should be doing.

I think that you, you know, if you're a church musician or a pastor, you need to look at your congregation, understand where they are, and do the music that honors God and fits the scriptural text the best in that situation. And then on the back burner, have these larger, longer term music education processes going for the future. So if you were in conclusion to give a short bit of advice to each of the following people, to a pastor, to a church musician, to a congregant in the church who's not a musician, and maybe to someone compiling a hymn book, what would be your brief advice to each one of those parties about what they could be doing now? I'm an academic.

My job is to just point out problems. I don't have to solve them. Well, my advice to a pastor would be just without remorse, try to make your vision of music consistent with and systematic with your theology.

Like if you've got good theology of worship, just draw, you know, ruthlessly and remorselessly draw the connection between that and music, even if it means do I have to countenance doing something that I know my congregation won't like? And then once you've done that, once you've made that mental decision, then you can figure out, oh boy, how do I transition my congregation over the next 20 years to where they need to be? For a church musician, I would say the opposite, basically, and that is take it slow with your congregation. You absolutely need to make sure that you're not losing them, because I think church musicians are always going to be the people who can sort of hear and see the musical future, and they are already there in their minds, but it takes a long time. And also don't forget that people love music if you repeat it a lot.

So just repeat the music you love a lot and they're going to like it. And then when you said to a congregant, I mean, I don't know, to a congregant, sing more music on your own. And what was the last one? And maybe someone compiling a hymn book.

Oh, yeah, someone compiling a hymn book. Well, I wrote a thing on this, you know, I think there should only be 100 per hymn book. And that was sort of almost a facetious thing.

I obviously recognize that it would probably have to be more than 100. But to someone compiling a hymn book, I would say prioritize the music that originates from the folk music tradition. Like there are many hymns which were composed by some composer, and then there are many hymns which are just simply a composer has harmonized a folk

tune.

And that's what I think Ray Fon Williams, the greatest hymn writer, that's what he does a lot of. Just chock full of that and a lot of good lyrics, a lot of good hymn texts, and everyone will love it. No matter, you know, it takes about two minutes for someone to fall in love with a good Ray Fon Williams hymn.

That's my advice. Wonderful. Thank you very much for joining me for this discussion.

It's been a pleasure. I'm also going to give a number of links to articles and other things that you've written that explore and develop some of the trains of conversation that we've had in the last hour. Great.

I apologize in advance to your readers. God bless. Thank you all for listening.