

An introduction to praise and worship

By *John Dawson*

What is praise and worship (P&W) music? In the last few years, the term “praise and worship” has developed into something of a generic description. Like “blues” or “jazz,” the term describes a particular repertoire. Unlike “blues” or “jazz,” which can easily bring to mind certain distinctive sonic characteristics, praise and worship music has more to do with its subject matter and its context than any specific musical characteristics as this music is intended to aid in the expression of a particular type of spirituality.

Musical style is not the sole determining factor in what music is deemed praise and worship. Like liturgical music in general, the clear communication of the subject matter is a much more prominent indicator of whether or not something falls into this category or not. Textually, the most common themes are generally the celebration and exclamation of God’s glory (praise) or repentance and surrender to God’s will because of how great God is (worship). This may risk oversimplifying the lyrics, but it is very common to see these themes repeatedly.

P & W music draws on many cultures and traditions, and is most certainly rooted in some form of “vernacular” music (i.e. folk or pop). For the most part, commercial recordings from praise and worship artists sound comparable to any pop music in terms of orchestration, writing style and production value. This is by no means an absolute, however, as even a cursory glance through Christian record stores will reveal that praise and worship is as stylistically varied as the composers who create it. Ska, Reggae, Jazz, Hardcore Heavy Metal, Hip Hop, Klezmer, all of these styles and more have been used in creating praise and worship music. P&W does stand in some juxtaposition to typical liturgical music as it rarely employs organs, choirs or other musical elements of “traditional” church music.

THE SOUND OF P&W

Praise and worship can sound very different from composer to composer. One can expect to find traces of everything from Klezmer to Rock in individual compositions. The one very common characteristic will be the instrumentation. P&W music is rooted in the vernacular, not in art music, and the most common instruments in the

pop or folk music from most cultures will usually involve some combination of guitar, bass, drums and percussion. This emphasis on the rhythm section is the

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instrumental core of praise and worship. This is also certainly at the heart of two of the greatest challenges that the Catholic Church is facing with this type of music.

First, most Catholic churches are not physically equipped to handle amplified instruments, and second, the mere sight of an amplifier or a drum set at a Mass can be enough to start a war within a parish community. Still, the presence of praise and worship music in mainstream Canadian Catholic life is not likely to diminish anytime soon; in fact, it seems to be only increasing.

THE RECENT EMERGENCE OF P&W

Praise and worship music has been around for some time even within Catholic communities. Charismatic prayer groups in particular have relied heavily on this repertoire, leading to some inclusion of it in the liturgy. The difference now is that we have witnessed an immense growth in the popularity of this music due in large part to World Youth Day 2002. Anyone who attended will recall that there was

a great deal of this music happening in many of the catechesis sites and on the various festival stages throughout the event. This resulted in many young people (and adult leaders) from around the country returning to their home parishes with the desire to bring the music that was so important to them more deeply into their faith life by expressing it in their communities.

THE APPEAL OF P&W

The popularity of P&W among the young is most likely due to the close resemblance between the aesthetic features of this music and those of the secular music that fills our lives. The instrumentation results in a much more rhythmic drive and so naturally is more viscerally appealing; short, catchy choruses with simple lyrics abound. The most important thing, however, may be that this music is often encountered within the context of a "mountaintop" experience like a weekend rally or World Youth Day, creating an emotional attachment that is not easily forgotten.

LISTENING OR SINGING?

In liturgical music, the assembly's participation is supposed to be the governing principle in choices of everything from text to the key of the song. Praise and worship is probably closer to pop songs than to liturgical music in that most praise and worship music is very "I"-centred as opposed to liturgical music, which rarely speaks of the individual. The ability of an assembly to sing a piece may be a more common concern amongst Catholic praise and worship artists if they understand liturgy but, in my experience with various artists, this is still slightly secondary to the personal expression of an idea or feeling. Praise and worship music seems to be primarily interior and personal.

People can sing along because a song is catchy or it moves them, but singing along is something very different from communal worship.

P&W AND PARISH LITURGY

There is no consensus on how or when praise and worship music is appropriate for liturgical use. Its use tends to be at the discretion of musical directors. Praise and worship services, rallies and other extra-liturgical events are places where one would be most likely to find this music playing a prominent role. Since World Youth Day, and the apparent increase in the inclusion of praise and worship music in the liturgy within many parish communities, it seems that the time is coming for a much more thorough discussion on the relationship of this music to the liturgy.

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Some parish communities greet this music and this style of spirituality with a great deal of prejudice. To some it is just "freaky"; to others it is very "un-Catholic." On the other hand, some have found that by making praise and worship a part of mainstream parish life they have attracted young people and generated renewed enthusiasm within the community. This could simply be the novelty of church music that is a little different or it could be that this music is demonstrating an aesthetic link

to the surrounding culture. In our society, the successful integration of faith into everyday life needs all of the help it can get, and to some, praise and worship music may be a way of better achieving that integration. Whatever the case may be, there is a great need to continue to look at what is happening with this phenomenon. Dialogue and discernment as to what influences this music has had and may continue to have on how liturgy is celebrated in Canada will only help.

I believe that there are bigger questions here that are way beyond the issue of liturgical appropriateness. This is a highly emotional form of music, and anytime an art form deeply connects with the emotional life, the possibility for manipulation of those emotions will arise. As well, one great danger of music like this is that people can confuse the emotional experience with the presence of God, in effect, becoming dependent on that experience to experience God's presence. We may have the feeling of God's presence, but we cannot let ourselves think that a catchy tune will conjure it up like some kind of magic. Faith is the knowledge of the truth of God's love and redemptive mercy, not just the emotional experience of it and that is a vital truth to keep in mind. This is a question of balance.

John Dawson, a "participant observer" of P&W, is a performer/composer/teacher who lives in the Toronto area. He has played sideman to a number of praise and worship artists in and around Toronto for some years and has played this music in everything from youth rallies to liturgies. He is the former Music Coordinator for the Office of Catholic Youth Ministry in Toronto, and facilitates and co-facilitates rallies, conferences and workshops across the country. He is currently pursuing his musical studies at York University in Toronto.