

WORSHIP or PERFORMANCE ?

Music has always been a point of contention in the church.

Hundreds of years ago church members argued over singing in harmony instead of unison (bye-bye, Gregorian chants!), then we argued over whether-or-not to use instruments, then over what instruments are appropriate for church music. Today we argue over word repetition, loudness, lights, fog, word repetition (see what I did there?), you name it.

Maybe I'm naïve, but when it comes to music I seldom see the church arguing over anything that's actually worth arguing over.

So what is worth arguing over – or at least taking seriously – when we're talking about worship through music?

Here's one.

We need to understand the differences between music for worship and music in performance.

Worship Is Different

I'm a huge fan of music for performance. Some of the most enjoyable, memorable evenings I've ever spent have been at concerts listening to musicians entertain us, inspire us, and make us gasp in awe at their artistry.

But worship music is something else, entirely. Whether the musical style is classical, pop, southern gospel, adult contemporary, choral, or spiced with a lot of salsa or soul, there should be some clear lines drawn between worship-based music and performance-based music.

Here are 6 of them:

1. In performance, the focus is on the musicians. In worship, the focus is on Jesus.

This is a given. Or it should be.

If the focus is on the musicians instead of Jesus, it's not worship, no matter what we call it.

If the focus is on the musicians instead of Jesus, it's not worship, no matter what we call it.

This doesn't mean there can't be a stage, or lights, or a worship team, or a robed choir, or microphones. But it does mean that everyone on stage should be using their artistry to point to Jesus, not themselves.

The fact that someone is on stage with amplified sound and lights doesn't mean they're drawing attention to themselves. If someone is going to lead in worship through music, the leader(s) need to be identified and heard. Lights, mics and a stage help that happen.

But let's not pretend that being on stage doesn't come with temptations. Whether it's a robed choir singing hymns, a worship team blasting out the latest worship song, or a pastor with a mic, we must be vigilant to use that stage to point to Jesus, not ourselves.

One great current trend is multiple lead singers on worship teams. This is a simple, subtle way to take the focus off one main singer and cue the audience that we're all engaged in worship together.

2. In performance, those on stage might be the only ones singing. In worship, everyone should be singing along.

There have been a lot of articles written recently about the [decline in participation](#) when churches are worshipping through music. We'd do well to heed what they're telling us.

If you think you're leading in worship but no one is singing along, you're not leading, you're performing.

If you think you're leading in worship but no one is singing along, you're not leading, you're performing.

3. In performance, the words should support the melody. In worship, the melody should support the words.

Have you ever had a favorite song that you knew all the words to, then were appalled or confused when you paused to consider the lyrics? That's because great performance-based songs are primarily about the melody, not the words.

In worship, it's the opposite. Words matter first.

Even when groups like the Grammy Awards make their categories, worship music is the only musical genre delineated by lyrical content, not musical style.

This is also why it's harder to write a great worship song. When you're writing a song for performance, you only need a great musical structure. If you also have great lyrics, it's a bonus (and it can make your song a classic), but it's not needed.

A great worship song needs strong lyrics and music that enhances them. But the lyrics must lead the music, not vice versa. That's hard to do. But it's essential.

4. In performance, the integrity of the musicians is secondary. In worship, the integrity of the musicians is essential.

Some of the greatest musicians in history were scoundrels. From Mozart, to Jerry Lee Lewis, to Ozzy Osbourne.

Until recently (in cases like R. Kelly), not only has their bad behavior not tarnished their reputation, it's often enhanced the public's interest in them and their songs.

Not so in worship music.

When you're leading people in worship, it matters that you're living a life of faith and integrity.

A few years ago there was a big debate about whether-or-not it's okay to have unbelievers playing on the worship team in church. It's stunning that we had that conversation. How can someone lead others in worship if they're not worshipers themselves? You can't lead people to a place you're not going.

Worship leaders need to be held to the same standards of behavior that we hold pastors to. If worship through music is an essential element of a church service (and it is), then the character of the leaders matters.

Musicianship is important in worship leaders. But not as much as integrity.

5. Virtuoso musical flourishes can attract you to a performance, but they distract from worship.

I've been drawn into worship by musicians celebrating God's praises in every musical style you can imagine. Even through musical styles that I don't particularly like.

I've even been blessed while being led by musicians who weren't especially talented, but who were offering their gift with a sincere, available heart.

But the one thing that can take me out of the moment is when a musician or singer makes it all about themselves by adding musical flourishes that draw attention to their talent, instead of to Jesus.

When it comes to musicians on worship teams, the rule is to be so good that you blend in, not stand out.

6. Performers need to be skilled musicians. Worship leaders need to be committed worshipers.

When leading worship through music, we should strive for excellence, not so people can stand in awe of our performance, but so people will stand in awe of Jesus.

We should strive for excellence, not so people can stand in awe of our performance, but so people will stand in awe of Jesus.

Worship teams should practice relentlessly to achieve musical excellence. In doing so, they should strive to be so in sync with each other that they're not thinking as much about chord changes as they are about being active participants in the worship they're leading us in to.

Styles Come And Go – Worship Lasts

Unlike many others who write about this subject, I'm not worried about the future of worship through music. The current arguments, battles and legitimate concerns over excesses in modern worship music and staging are nothing new.

We've had these conversations before. We'll have them again. And we should.

Arguments over worship styles, song lyrics, instruments and staging are important. The only thing that changes is which style we're arguing over today.

Songs come and go. Musicians come and go. Styles come and go. Worship lasts.