



# CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ADVICE FROM A CHURCH MUSICIAN

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Simon Dixon is director of worship at The Falls Church Anglican, outside Washington DC. In the second part of a two-part article, he shares some advice on balancing traditional with contemporary worship and reminds us to keep a sense of humour.

remember as an organ student being told to avoid churches that had drums or guitars. They were ‘the enemy’ of the organ and would, when introduced at a church, lead to the organ being broken up for firewood!

Well, I ended up joining ‘the enemy’ when I married a guitarist, and over the 20 years since, I am yet to hear any mention of breaking up one of the organs. On the contrary, I have been encouraged to build a classical choir, play and develop a concert series designed to give music students experience of performing, oversee an extensive pipe organ renovation, perform Handel’s *Messiah* with professional soloists and orchestra, lead a formal service of lessons and carols and, finally, to explore how the organ and contemporary worship might work together.

The challenge was that I’d never played contemporary worship music before. With contemporary worship, you tend to play from a chord sheet rather than notes and I found that rather unnerving. Being classically trained, I could barely play the national anthem without the music. Today, with all the technology at our disposal, it’s much easier to build a bridge between playing from music and chord sheets. I learnt the hard way. It took time listening and practising slowly, and, with the patience and encouragement of the talented musicians I was working alongside, I learnt how to play and lead contemporary worship. I found not being constrained by the written notes freeing and, to this day, I prefer not to play from music if possible.

My contemporary worship colleague has even encouraged me to play from a tablet on Sundays instead of paper. This is good for the environment, it’s flexible and it means we can change songs or keys more easily. Just make sure the battery is fully charged!

### IT’S NOT HOW MANY NOTES YOU PLAY, BUT WHICH ONES YOU OMIT

There is a place for the organ and classical instruments in more contemporary settings. I have found the organ to be effective undergirding, bringing support to other instruments. I’ve learnt that it’s not how many notes you play, but which ones you miss out, listening more to the other instruments, as well as the congregation, as you would if you were playing in an orchestra.

As a musician with experience leading both traditional and contemporary worship, I am grateful to have a wide perspective when it comes to worship styles. Indeed, it has been a privilege to help several churches at which the musicians, clergy and congregation have become stuck. I was once invited to speak at a church in Sweden where the ageing choir

had stopped talking to the younger worship band, who felt criticized and discouraged. As I saw what was going on, and as my translator began to interpret my words, I began to weep because I could see a church of godly folk being torn apart. It turns out that the choir felt threatened by the worship team and thought that they were going to be replaced, which was not the plan. As I began to speak to the situation, I reminded them that the body of Christ is made of many parts, all equally important. I asked both sides to consider the other’s musical gifts, and to encourage rather than criticize. I can’t quite remember who reached out first, but, after some silence and prayer, one by one they extended a hand of forgiveness to one another and soon everyone was hugging, smiling and crying! It was truly wonderful to witness, and we ended the day worshipping together as the family of God.

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### CHANGE CAN BE UNSETTLING

For many of us, change, whether personal or corporate, can be unsettling. We may prefer things to remain familiar and may feel the need to resist the introduction of something with which we are unfamiliar. Here are some quotes attributed to a member of clergy in the 18th century opposing a new worship trend. I wonder if you can guess what worship trend the author opposed?

- ▶ It is too new, like an unknown language.
- ▶ It is not as melodious as the more established style.
- ▶ There is so much new music that it is impossible to learn it all.
- ▶ This new music creates disturbances and causes people to act in an indecent and disorderly manner.
- ▶ The words and texts are often worldly, even blasphemous.
- ▶ It is not needed since preceding generations have gone to heaven without it.

It may surprise you to know that these complaints were directed against the introduction of hymns into churches!



## MUSIC FOR THE MOMENT

My love for both traditional and contemporary worship continues to this day. I've learnt the importance of adapting some of the great hymns for those who have recently come to faith through a friend or relative or an Alpha course, or who are unchurched and not familiar with singing hymns and spiritual songs. There have been times when I have caught myself thinking 'that hymn should have an extra Alleluia', or 'it just doesn't go like that'. But once again, I realize that it's not about me and my preferences, but about God and his glory.

Many of our favourite hymns will hopefully be sung for years to come, whereas I think this is not always the case for contemporary songs, nor is it meant to be. Many classical church musicians were employed to compose music that reflected the times in which they lived, and I believe contemporary worship does something similar where a scripture or theme can be relatively quickly set to song and help express what an individual or church or nation is feeling at that time. They are meant 'for the moment' and not necessarily meant to stand up to the test of time.

As a student, I remember being concerned that I was playing to dwindling congregations where it was not exceptional for the choir to outnumber the ageing congregation. All those empty pews seemed like they belonged to a bygone era. I used to play for a Sunday service where it was not uncommon for there to be between one and three people (and a dog). We would sing two or three hymns and I would be

concerned about losing count of the number of verses because I couldn't hear the singing from up in the organ loft. I realize numbers are not everything, but it was refreshing to play for a packed church of more than 900 worshippers and having to pull out all the stops so I could hear the organ above the voices every Sunday.

At our Anglican church just outside Washington DC, we lead worship in a beautifully and recently built sanctuary with all the acoustic bells and whistles that allow an organ, grand piano, choirs, soloists, band and congregation to worship alongside one another. We are fortunate to have a thriving multigenerational adult choir that sings every Sunday, three children's choirs and a worship team with gifted instrumentalists.

One highlight is our annual performance of Handel's *Messiah* (Part 1, plus Hallelujah Chorus) with orchestra and soloists during Advent. We sing it on a Sunday morning as part of our main service. The day before we offer a 'singalong *Messiah*', to which people come and join a choir of more than 700 singers. Most of them are just visitors who love to sing this God-inspired piece of music. It's a glorious sound, but a challenge to a conductor: I soon realized that I couldn't expect friends and families to separate from each other to form soprano, alto, tenor and bass sections. I informed them beforehand that when I point up to the right, that means sopranos, when I point up to the left, it means altos, and so forth. It makes for some great aerobics, especially when multiple entrances occur in quick succession!



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#### **A SENSE OF HUMOUR**

There is one other characteristic that is hard to teach, and which I would like to suggest is a helpful ingredient when facing the ups and downs of being a church musician, and that is to maintain a sense of humour and not take yourself too seriously. Sometimes, however much we have prepared for and anticipated a service or concert, there are circumstances that are out of our control (see the examples listed in the first of these two articles). That's not to say we don't still expect to give of our best, but if I allow myself to get too stressed because members of the choir are consistently late for a rehearsal, or are *still* singing an E natural instead of an E flat, or are coming in too early or too late (or not at all), then my English sarcasm can kick in and unhelpful comments follow: 'well at least I recognized the piece as the one we're meant to be singing!'

Thankfully the choirs I have worked with have been forgiving of my eccentricities and, at the end of day, we have built trusting and lasting friendships as we lead worship together for the glory of God.

I do so appreciate the great tradition of weekly church notices (or 'announcements' as we call them in the USA), which are usually informative of upcoming events and can be amusing when not written quite as originally intended. May I share a few with you by way of not taking ourselves too seriously:

- ▶ The Fasting and Prayer Conference includes meals.
- ▶ Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands!
- ▶ Eight new robes are currently needed due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.
- ▶ At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be 'What is hell?' Come early and listen to our choir practice!
- ▶ Next Thursday there will be try-outs for the choir. They need all the help they can get!

So, when the organ is cyphering, or the choir are not singing the way you would like, when you've lost 'that vital piece of music', or your soloist is nowhere to be found, I encourage you to do the best you can in the moment and not to take yourself or the situation too seriously. Yes, we care and pay attention to the details. Next Sunday is coming, so you get to do it all over again, and maybe next time everything will go as you planned (although I don't think it ever has for me). It's often in those moments when I've thought 'I wish the ground could swallow me up' that I've heard the positive impact a piece of music or song or hymn has had on someone, and I realize once again that God is in control and that, thankfully, I am not.