

Conference Report
“Christian Congregational Music: Local and Global Perspectives”
Ripon College Cuddesdon, Oxford, 1-3 September 2011

Report compiled for the British Forum for Ethnomusicology
(<http://www.bfe.org.uk/conferencearchive.html>)

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Sixty-seven scholars – over half of whom were ethnomusicologists – from ten nations participated in this conference, organized by Monique Ingalls (University of Cambridge, UK) and Carolyn Landau (King’s College, London). Together with chair Martyn Percy (Ripon College Cuddesdon), Tom Wagner (Royal Holloway, London), and Mark Porter (City University, London) on the programme committee, they created a stimulating programme that explored congregational music from multiple global and disciplinary perspectives. After a warm welcome, the first plenary explored the idea of performing theology through music. Martin Stringer’s (Birmingham) presentation raised questions about the trivialisation of liturgy in the context of current trends toward comfortableness, intimacy, and musical spontaneity in worship. Carol Muller (Pennsylvania) used her book on the Shembe hymns of South Africa to reflect on what the relationship between theology and performance might look like ethnomusicologically, asking whether “the theological” might only exist in the ephemerality of performance. This was followed by parallel sessions with panels addressing the themes of re-forming identities, replacing binaries, and performing identities. The Christian congregational musics of Chinese Christians based in the UK, Catholic and Protestant churches in Java, Australian Aboriginal Lutherans in Queensland, and HIV-positive Christians in South Africa were explored. The second keynote plenary, “Politics and congregational singing,” included an interactive lecture performance by June Boyce-Tillman (Winchester), who discussed the musical aesthetics and value systems implicit in Western congregational and choral singing. Melvin Butler (Chicago) spoke about Pentecostalism in Haiti and the theopolitics of musical performance. After the evening dinner, the last roundtable of day one focused on “Music and the Christian congregation,” discussing what constitutes congregation, and how music participates in – or complicates – its definition.

Day two began with a plenary session on “Imagining community through praise and worship music,” with Gesa Hartje (Leuphana-Lüneburg) discussing the internet and the Christian music industry, and Monique Ingalls (Cambridge) discussing the role of festivals and parades, both focused on creating senses of Christian community outside the setting of the local church. A panel session followed, featuring topics of imported traditions, technology and transformation, and managing meaning. Papers covered topics from hymn singing and ritual in South Africa, Namibia, and Taiwan, to questions of canonicity and the effects of globalization and denominationalism on Christian hymnody, to the role of music in spiritual transformation and sacrament. The next parallel session included a panel on transnational Christian musics, with papers on corporate branding and musical placemaking in the music of Hillsong, the internationalization of the music of the Taizé community in France, and the use of German chorales and American songs in Victorian-era Wales; a second panel addressed questions of musical innovation and tradition in a Catholic congregation in Hungary, the

Fundamentalist Independent Baptist denomination in America, and an African American megachurch; and a third panel discussed “Contested histories and invented traditions,” covering psalm singing during the seventeenth century English civil war, gospel hymn traditions in Melanesia, and the lack of definition surrounding the term “gospel music.” The formal activities of day two ended with a plenary session on tradition and innovation in American and Australian church music. Deborah Smith-Pollard (Michigan-Dearborn) presented the balance and blending of praise and worship music with African American “devotional” services rooted in eighteenth-century slave music traditions. Mark Evans (Macquarie) discussed the internationalization of Hillsong churches, touching on issues of cultural imperialism and profitability versus the ecumenical potential and sense of collective belonging offered by Hillsong’s global spread. Day two ended with a lively reception.

The final day began with a plenary session on “Togetherness and difference in Christian singing.” Jonathan Dueck (Duke) reflected on affective characteristics of Mennonite hymnody, consciously inscribed in hymnal innovations over the years, and Jeffers Englehart (Amherst College) discussed the creation of ecumenicity through song in Estonian Orthodox churches. Panel session four traced themes ranging from the role of music in the reorientation of South African Dutch Reformed churches from theocracy to mission; the Ancient-Future movement, post “worship wars;” hybridity, identity, and musical change in Korean, Caribbean, Jamaican, and American churches; and devotion, expectation, and authenticity in the charismatic traditions of both contemporary evangelicals and eighteenth-century Herrnhute brethren. The conference’s fifth and final panel session comprised presentations on the use of technology and lyrical versus musical emphasis in contemporary congregational music; Christian music and national identity in Mauritius and in Bolivian churches in America; and the role of music in defining denominational identity.

The conference culminated in a roundtable reflecting on themes and concerns that had emerged, with group discussion about next steps. Many conference participants expressed appreciation for the depth of discussion facilitated by a gathering of this nature, often more difficult to achieve in broader contexts. They expressed strong desire for a follow-up conference, which is consequently already in the planning stages for 2013. Participants at this conference have since been invited to join SEM’s Sacred/Religious Music SIG, and plans are underway to publish selected papers in an edited volume.

Recommendations for future consideration included: the musical embodiment of faith, along with reflection on its theological basis, its gendering and construction, and the role of gesture and dance; the centrality of social relationships in congregational Christian music; exploration of theoretical and thematic links to scholarship on other religious traditions, including the aesthetic and timbral constitution of “Christian” music; the exchange between academic and applied perspectives; tensions between professionalism and involvement in church music; the impact of the Christian music scholar’s reflexive position on his or her scholarship; and creating exchange between Christian music scholars who represent a variety of personal Christian or non-Christian perspectives.

Participants enjoyed opportunities to socialize at the Bat & Ball pub, attend morning prayer services at the 12th-century village church, and explore the numerous walking trails on the

picturesque grounds and through the surrounding rolling hills and farmland of southern England. The international breadth of topics and participants contributed to an invigorating and collegial conversation, all facilitated by the remarkable hospitality and outstanding facilities and catering of Ripon College Cuddesdon, in the context of a glorious autumn weekend in rural Oxfordshire. We heartily thank the organizers and hosts for such a productive and enjoyable event, which will undoubtedly result in new directions in Christian music scholarship.