

Congregational Music, Conflict and Community

LIFE SONGS



Jonathan Dueck

Congregational Music, Conflict and Community

Congregational Music, Conflict and Community is the first study of the music of the contemporary ‘worship wars’ – conflicts over church music that continue to animate and divide protestants today – to be based on long-term in-person observation and interviews. It tells the story of the musical lives of three Canadian Mennonite congregations, who sang together despite their musical differences at the height of these debates in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Mennonites are among the most music-centred Christian groups in North America, and each congregation felt deeply about the music they chose as their own. The congregations studied span the spectrum from traditional to blended to contemporary worship styles, and from evangelical to liberal protestant theologies. At their core, the book argues, worship wars are not fought in order to please congregants’ musical tastes nor to satisfy the theological principles held by a denomination. Instead, the relationships and meanings shaped through individuals’ experiences singing in the particular ways afforded by each style of worship are most profoundly at stake in the worship wars. As such, this book will be of keen interest to scholars working across the fields of religious studies and ethnomusicology.

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For my mother, who taught me to tell stories and that sociology is useful in all of life; my father, who read and gave me ideas on all my writing, including this; and for Celia, who has lived the long journey of this book with me.



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1 Introduction

The stakes of the worship wars: musical style, theology or an aesthetics of encounter?

In 1999, historian Michael S. Hamilton wrote an article in the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* entitled ‘The Triumph of the Praise Songs: How guitars beat out the organ in the worship wars’. For Hamilton and others in the evangelical press, there has been a sea change in religious identity in the West centred on congregational worship: ‘American churchgoers no longer sort themselves out by denomination so much as by musical preference’.¹ Hamilton traces two histories of change in church music, initiated by the Baby Boomer generation: first, the ‘reformist’ incorporation of contemporary political and social concerns into hymnody, and second, the ‘revolutionary’ adoption of popular music and scrapping of hymnody in church. If the guitars have not yet clearly ‘won’, according to Hamilton, they have at least very successfully divided churches by musical affinity and age, and given that younger church members are most often fans of popular music, guitars are well on their way to ‘winning’ because those churches that appeal to young people are most likely to survive.

As if to confirm this analysis, a layperson in a Canadian Mennonite church told me: ‘[our church music] changed from the traditional hymn singing to the more contemporary singing sometime before we came . . . I think that [these] are good changes. The singing style appeals to our young people who are our future’. In these accounts, the musical style – the sound of the music, its instrumentation, its typical melodic and rhythmic features – appears to be the central issue in Christian conflicts over music. Style’s relationship to a marketplace of churches and their musical practices appears, here, to determine the rightful winner of these ‘worship wars’.

In the same period, evangelical theologian Marva Dawn wrote her broadly influential book, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*. Dawn offered a theological criticism of ‘market-oriented’ moves to ‘dumb down’ music and worship, which aimed to attract and retain members by entertaining them. These aims, Dawn argued, do not express the focus on God that characterises serious theology of worship. In Dawn’s account, then, the worship wars are most centrally about a theology of worship, that is, the normative principles and understandings of God that guide Christian worship, not about musical style.²

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But, in the same year that Hamilton wrote his article and only a few years after Dawn wrote her book, another Mennonite in Edmonton, Alberta, made this comment to me:

. . . one of the wonderful offshoots of [choirs at First Mennonite] is the number of times that we have three generations in one choir . . . in September when we [sang] this year, my entire family . . . were all in the choir . . . in fact that time in September there were actually three families like that . . . three entire households that were represented in the choir.

This singer emphasises neither musical style nor a ‘performed’ theology of worship, but rather the social relationships that he experiences when singing church music with others.³ I heard about social relationships nurtured in musical performance from members of churches that practiced popular music, too. One man told me about his long experience as a bassist in secular popular music bands. Having grown up attending a large stone Lutheran church that, he said, ‘was apart from the community . . . you got that feeling’, he visited River West Christian Church (Mennonite Brethren) when friends suggested it. But, it was the invitation to play in the band and the experience of rehearsing and performing regularly with it that made the church most meaningful for him. These two people’s experiences of church music, in other words, are not presented in terms of the pleasure they feel when they hear their preferred musical style. Nor do they couch their experiences of church music in theologies of how the church ought to worship God. Instead, First Mennonite Church’s choir and River West’s worship team – musical ensembles that are also particular social groups – allow these two musicians to continue patterns of musical meaning, which are also patterns of friendship and of community that they have formed over the course of their musical lives.

If, as I have suggested, the stakes of the worship wars have most often been seen in terms of musical style (the sound and form of the music and the way these make up musical genre) or theologies of worship (articulated beliefs about the right ways of worshipping God), in this book, I draw on stories like the two I have just retold to suggest a third way to understand the wars, through the lens of aesthetics.

Though I will return to these ideas throughout this book, I want to offer at least a preliminary discussion of aesthetics here. Beginning to think through the concept here will help me make clear why paying attention to aesthetics, not in itself but in the lives and memories of particular people, is worth doing for ethnomusicologists like myself, for other scholars in the interdisciplinary field of congregational music study and for people engaged in doing and thinking about music in the church.

Perhaps, the most common definition of aesthetics is as the branch of philosophy concerned with the beautiful – an understanding that, as anthropologist Birgit Meyer points out, is Kantian, against which Meyer counterposes the earlier Aristotelian idea of *aisthesis*, the ensemble of the senses in our bodily

experience and their particular capacities to perceive, a valuable understanding to which I will shortly return.⁴ But, with church music particularly in mind, at least two other sets of understandings of the word are important: normative theological and musicological understandings of the aesthetics of pieces of music (or even musical ‘works’) and social-scientific understandings that see aesthetics as a kind of discourse that reveals other commonly held frameworks and social structures for a group.

Among elite churchly insiders weighing in on musical practice, both theologians and church music scholars often present qualitative understandings of what might be ‘better’ music. When they do so, they draw on traditions of aesthetics that have been influential in the discipline of musicology, which explore and evaluate the specific qualities of pieces of music. These traditions understand pieces of music as ‘works’, musical objects with structure that can be traced and understood like a text can and usually also objects that are tied particularly to their creators (composers). Within this tradition of aesthetics, I might locate intellectually rigorous work as widely divergent as that of Jeremy Begbie, whose ontological exploration of music ties ‘being’ and ‘import’ to what can be apprehended through the ‘form’ of music and Kenneth Hull, who draws on cognitive psychology to graft understandings of popular versus art musical styles onto the psychological states that these styles might engender.⁵

Aesthetics are sometimes paired and contrasted with ‘ethics’, which are not concerned with beauty, but with right action. But, the arguments made within this line of thinking – much like the arguments made within the popular debates on the ‘worship wars’ that I introduced in the brief vignettes above – mix and link ethical and aesthetic statements, suggesting that, for many Christians, what is beautiful (or worshipful, or meaningful, etc.) and what is right can be closely related. These elite strands of thought are intertwined with the voices in the popular debate on the worship wars that reference ‘style’ and also ‘theology’ in my view: both make their arguments through reference to the musical ‘objects’ of church music and to the ways those objects position us as ethical subjects in relation to God. (My comments here resonate with ethnomusicologist Timothy Rommen’s notion of the ‘ethics of style’, that is, the linkage between the ways musical style can identify its practitioners and the communal processes of religious discernment that evaluate the ethics of these identity positions.⁶)

Among social scientists writing on religion, aesthetics are more often understood as a field of discourse that informs the way particular groups of people engage with the world through their senses – in other words, aesthetics are sets of beliefs, texts, practices, et cetera that together become the standpoints from which communities experience the world sensorially (feeling, hearing, seeing, touching) and also a place where they debate *how* to experience the world sensorially. Charles Hirschkind’s writing exploring how Egyptian Muslims learn to listen to recorded sermons, and also the debates within the community on how this might best be done, is one example of this kind of ‘aesthetics’. Birgit Meyer presents aesthetics as a kind of activity through which

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people make meaning, meaning that subsequently becomes part of how they see. For example, Meyer examines how Ghanaian Christians make meaning when they make images, tracing the way they ascribe particular meanings and sensibilities to images and the ways they then experience those meanings and sensibilities in the images. Meyer's later writing draws our attention not only to the agency of religious believers, but also to the power dynamics of religion through her notion of 'sensational forms', which are particular, relatively stable, powerful and regulated constellations of sensory experience involved in mediating the transcendent and the believer in particular religious contexts. These understandings of aesthetics are one step removed from the popular debates I have outlined, and they are more closely related to my approach here: like these writers, I am presenting the 'worship wars' in part as a field of debate on aesthetics.⁷

However, when the Christians I interviewed began to tell me stories rooted not in the qualities of pieces or styles of church music, nor in the ways those qualities felt or were 'right', but instead in their memories of singing songs in particular ways with particular others, I began to think of another aspect of aesthetics that can inform, but is rarely explicitly part of the public discussions of aesthetics that scholars such as Meyer and Hirschkind track. That is, I began to think of the most basic stakes of 'the worship wars' in terms of aesthetics – an experiential, embodied, practiced feelingful way of encountering the world – rooted in individuals' contingent and particular life experiences with other people through music.⁸ This is a particular perspective on aesthetics, which, in partial deference to social theorists Deleuze and Guattari's thinking on identity, I am calling an 'aesthetics of encounter', an aesthesis that happens momentarily in and through our interactions with others, shaping our musical bodies and trajectories in the process.⁹

An aesthetics of encounter, then, while invested in history, memory and social experience, is, therefore, less total and stable and more emergent, more contingent, than that articulated by, for example, Meyer – more interested, as Shelemay and Finnegan's seminal studies were, in the pathways individuals take as they move from one musical context to another and in the ways their memories accompany them.¹⁰ To ground this in my research, because in the Western, secular, and plural contexts in which I did my fieldwork, church music-makers understood their stories in highly individual ways that often did not reflect normative theological understandings or music-industry narratives, and drew on those stories in retelling the moment of musical experiences they felt they shared with others, I began to understand musical experience in church (and what is at stake in debates concerning that experience) as a momentary, partial and sometimes, deep conjunction of individuals musicking together.¹¹ The theological and economic structures, codes and narratives that scholars and practitioners most often think of as ordering worship and its music were part of these moments of aesthetic encounter, but did not entirely determine the practices, meanings or social possibilities of such moments.

Thinking of music in terms of an aesthetics of encounter, then, invokes both the individual histories of musical encounter that accrete in contingent ways (not random, but not entirely determined by power structures) over time, and the simultaneity of moments of musical encounter when this polyphony of meanings inflects the attitudes of our bodies breathing and singing together, shaping the future possibilities of musical encounter that unfurl variously and individually from that moment of musical and religious togetherness.

The two complexities emerging from my above vignettes of Mennonite singers and my subsequent discussion of aesthetics as they might bear on ‘the worship wars’ – the overlap between aesthetics and ethics in discussions of the worship wars and the dearth of discussion of individual experience and memory of musicking in these discussions – suggest, for me, that in order to make sense of the worship wars, we need to rethink the importance of aesthetics in church music and also the place of individual experience and memory in aesthetics.

In this book, then, I ask: what is really at stake in the worship wars (and, more broadly, in the music performed together in worship)? I address this question by exploring the ways church music was practiced in three Mennonite churches in Western Canada in the early 2000s and the ways it had changed in the early 2010s. Mennonites are a group of Christian denominations with roots in the radical sixteenth-century Reformation who share a great deal of common ground with North American protestants and evangelicals. Mennonites span a wide ideological spectrum, from liberal, to evangelical and sometimes politically conservative, to what Judith Klassen rightly calls the ‘conserving’ stance of churches such as Old Order Mennonites (and their religious cousins, the Amish).¹² While North American Mennonites are especially known for choral and hymn singing, Mennonite denominations also sing ‘world music’ of various types, and of course, Christian popular music. The seriousness and, indeed, passion with which many Mennonite churches (and their members) approach music make them an ideal site from which to consider these broad conflicts over church music. Each of the three congregations on which this book centres practices music that represents one of the three positions churches have most often taken in this controversy: traditional music, contemporary music or a blended service using both of these musical genres.

In sum, I argue that an aesthetics of encounter (an aesthetics rooted in the conjunction of experience and memory), not musical style or theology, is the most basic consideration for this group of Christians in the worship wars. Theologians and other churchly élites often see changes in the function of music in worship or in the beliefs of church members as the most important outcomes of conflicts over church music.¹³ Like these élites, the Canadian Mennonites I studied gave theological rationales accounting for their musical preferences. But, in contrast to these élite accounts, these Mennonites then told musical life stories in which particular genres of music or even individual songs reminded them of – even placed them in, once again – relationships with friends and loved ones. In recalling memories of relationships in which they performed

music together, the Mennonites I spoke with invested songs and genres with meanings that were much more complex and diverse than their musical style or theological content. If I were to model my interviewees' responses as a series of paradigmatic statements, they might begin with the statement, 'It is right that we sing this song . . .' But, this statement would be followed by 'It is beautiful to sing this song . . .' and finally, 'I remember how it was beautiful when we sang this song together'. My interviews suggest that individual preferences for music depend not only on a song's musical style or the theology that its lyrics (or musical form) can express, but also – and most basically – on the ways music becomes beautiful to each of us because it is embedded in our enduring and changing relationships with others.¹⁴

Mennonites and other Christians, of course, also bring theological beliefs into the relationships they form with others. However, our relationships are often complex, self-contradictory and (wonderfully or woefully) messy in comparison to our articulated beliefs; in other words, theologies are best understood as just one resource among many, which Christians draw on in forming the ties that constitute the churchly community. I argue that an aesthetics of encounter, aesthetics reimaged as embodied relationships enacted in and emerging through music, are most basically at stake for Canada's Mennonites in the worship wars, and that understanding musical style and theology entails first understanding those aesthetics.¹⁵

Why is this argument useful? As I argued above, both musicological and theological accounts of the worship wars too often reduce musical performances and the complex feelings accompanying them to mere stylistic preferences, or judge music as if it were either a theological proposition or a 'piece' to be evaluated in terms of its innovation or balance in musical form (as scholarly Western art music criticism sometimes does). These theological, sociological and musicological understandings of church music reveal important formal and textual aspects of particular songs or music genres, but they draw attention away from the meaningful and complex social relationships that happen in and through musical performance. Worse, by understanding music as if it were propositional rather than narrative – that is, as if it were part of a logical argument rather than part of a life story – these perspectives entrench the positions Christians take in the worship wars.¹⁶ Reframing musical aesthetics, as I do here, is a way of asking us to *first* consider how music and musical practices are situated in particular relationships and memories for individuals and *then* to work towards ways in which these meanings can be shared, performed, critiqued and exchanged – in other words, to work for a more truly communicative discussion of our sharply contested church music practices.

Mennonite music as a window on the worship wars for North American Christians

The Mennonite churches of Edmonton, Alberta (Canada), offer a particular and compelling window on Christian congregational music between the late

1990s and the present. I did my primary fieldwork there between the years of 1998 and 2001 and returned to the field for two intense visits in 2009 and 2012. I myself grew up as a Mennonite, and, partly by virtue of the religious and social background I shared with members of each of these churches, I had substantial opportunities to participate in and observe the musical practice of each church, and a good deal of common ground that was useful in the discussions I had there. My research was partly driven, then, by a strong desire to understand the musical changes taking place in my own religious community.

But Edmonton's Mennonite churches are remarkably useful for thinking through the broader landscape of the worship wars in contemporary North America. They practice all of the major musical positions taken in the 'wars': traditional, contemporary and blended worship. More importantly, when my research began, these churches worshipped together at least once a year, collaborating with each other and other area congregations on an inter-Mennonite Good Friday service. This highly unusual gathering together of different musical practices presented a kind of lived microcosm of the 'wars.'¹⁷

I tried to explore this microcosm both from the standpoint of each congregation and from the standpoint of the conversation about church music that took place between them. I worked at and worshipped with each congregation for 6 to 8 months, pursuing in-depth interviews with twenty to twenty-five members of each church. I also did fieldwork at several Good Friday services and interviewed its participants. In all of this research, I was a participant as well as an observer. I found myself profoundly appreciative of each congregation's musical practices and beliefs, and I felt privileged to hear the thoughtful reflections individuals offered me, including their divergent and sometimes critical understandings of each other's music. I see the larger picture of these congregations as one of musical relationships, including conflict relationships, negotiated by deeply faithful persons and congregations. In presenting this complicated picture of a faithful people, I have tried to respect the positions and wishes of my interviewees by usually presenting the interviewee's critical commentaries anonymously, using pseudonyms or general terms indicating a person's role ('A young worship leader commented to me . . .').¹⁸

What emerged from my research is a view of the broader Christian landscape of musical conflict, where hymns are pitted against popular music, through the lens of Mennonite music. North American Mennonites engage with Western art music culture through an exceptionally strong choral singing tradition rooted in European Mennonite history. They also pursue popular music inside and outside of the church and have produced highly successful popular musicians.¹⁹ Drawing on the international connections that Mennonite development and service networks have offered to many Mennonites, even in rural communities, Mennonites also perform what might be called world music (or at least world hymnody) in church.²⁰ Edmonton's Mennonite community offered all of these practices. One congregation boasted a family string quartet whose members

had performed internationally. Another's sound person had founded one of Canada's most important secular recording studios. Yet another's music was frequently led by a French-speaking Congolese musician with dreams of a recording contract and of a broad audience for his worship music.

This multiplicity of Mennonite musical practices and identities is not an accident, but reflects historical forces strongly related to the ways most protestant Christian denominations negotiate musical practice and identity in contemporary North America. Sixteenth-century Anabaptists, the larger historical movement from which Mennonites developed (and presently an umbrella term for the theological category to which Mennonites belong), baptised each other in defiance of the synthesis of church and state. They articulated their beliefs in writing and exchanged ideas with reformers of the day. Their dissent led to persecution and to expulsion from various Central European nations (the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, Switzerland) to the condition of displacement that some writers have called 'unhomeliness.'²¹ Mennonites borrowed music and culture from each place they encountered on this long, splintered journey—gospel hymns, for example, borrowed from evangelical German-speakers in Russia, but later remembered as Mennonite heart-songs, and the type used to set a nineteenth-century American Mennonite songbook borrowed, along with melodies, from an influential Southern tunebook compiler.²²

Written texts and songs were very important to early Anabaptists and Mennonites, as they are forms of media that can move between displaced communities. The early Anabaptist hymnal, the *Ausbund*, was first printed in 1564 in Europe; the *Martyr's Mirror*, a set of stories of Anabaptist and Mennonite martyrs, was also printed on one of the earliest German-language printing presses in North America. In other words, Mennonite origins are tied to the emergence of the idea that religious identities should be chosen, to the development of print media, to displacement and diaspora and to the transformation of Europe and North America into modern and pluralist nation states – all of which form parts of the framework in which many North American Christians choose churches and in which they debate what music they should sing.²³

The equally multiple musical practices of Mennonites, emerging from the intercultural contacts arising from their history, therefore, provide not only a picture of Mennonite musical practice, but also one window through which to consider what might be happening in the broader landscape of the worship wars for North American Christians.

Notes on terms

This book collects data gathered, for an ethnography in any case, over a relatively long period of time (between 1998 and 2012) and so, a brief explanatory note on terms and time is necessary.

First, in deference to the common practice among Mennonites, I often use the term 'church music' here to refer to the music performed in congregations.

Sometimes I use the term ‘congregational music’, which is, of course, in the title of this book and this series.²⁴ ‘Congregational music’ is a good term, one that speaks across denominational differences and underlines the importance of observing *practice* in worship. However, because Canadian Mennonites most often refer to their congregations as ‘churches’ and the categories of music performed there as ‘church music’ (indeed, I hold a Bachelor’s degree in Church Music from a Canadian Mennonite college!), for the most part, I have chosen to use that term in the body chapters of the book. The term, for Mennonites and others on the ‘left wing’ of the Reformation, also suggests the way churchly authority is understood: it is rooted in the local congregation, which, therefore, can be understood as ‘church’.

I will most often use present tense to discuss musical life, social background and in fieldnotes, and past tense when commenting on field materials I have presented. This use of present tense to communicate the liveliness of experience in the field (even of experiences a decade ago, like those I describe in several chapters here) is called the ‘ethnographic present’ and is an often-used device in ethnography.

But, I am describing these congregations in particular periods of the past. Chapters 2 to 6 describe musical and social life at First Mennonite, River West and Holyrood in the early 2000s; unless otherwise noted, all interviews and fieldnotes in those chapters are from this earlier period. All of these churches had changed in quite substantial ways when I visited them again in 2009 and 2012; those later visits are presented in the final chapter. All of them have changed substantially since that time as well, and are changing still.

Ethnography is not news, nor is it history, nor can it offer a complete view of all aspects of life in a place even in the ‘ethnographic present’ – only what is available to the ethnographer in that time and place, unavoidably from the standpoint of her or his analytic interests.

So, I am presenting a picture of these congregations as I encountered them at two particular periods in their past, the early 2000s and the early 2010s, more or less – I am *not* offering a picture of these congregations as they are now, nor a confident prophecy of where they are going, nor an unbiased and total account of where they were in each period of research.

Over that time, the names of the conferences and colleges connected with these congregations have also changed. In 2000, the General Conference Mennonite Church (abbreviated GC, the roots of First Mennonite) and the Mennonite Church (abbreviated MC, the roots of Holyrood) joined to form two national conferences, Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA, respectively. But, at the provincial level, the older conference structures remained for several years, and members of local congregations continued to describe themselves as ‘GC’ or ‘MC’ for some years after this national merger. (One interviewee in 2012 reminded me that I was ‘GC’, and therefore, had different denominational questions than he did.) In Chapters 2 to 6, therefore, for simplicity’s sake and to reflect the on-the-ground cultural reality, I refer

to GC, MC and MB (Mennonite Brethren) groupings. In Chapter 7, I refer instead to MC Canada (the merged national conference) and MBs.²⁵

Similarly, Winnipeg had been the home of two Mennonite colleges, that influentially taught church musicians, pastors and laity for Canadian Mennonites: Canadian Mennonite Bible College (or CMBC) and Concord College (which began its life as Mennonite Brethren Bible College). These colleges merged with a third college, Menno Simons College, to offer their first courses as Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) in September 1999. I use the colleges' earlier names when referring to interactions Edmonton Mennonites had with the schools prior to the fall of 1999 and CMU for interactions after that watershed.

Another term deserves particular mention: 'ethnic' Mennonites, a term used to describe and sometimes to self-identify especially by Swiss Mennonites and Russian Mennonites, the largest groups of North Mennonites that immigrated from Europe. While Mennonites are described as 'ethnic' by scholars, and in self-identifications, the term is controversial because Mennonites are, of course, a religious group that anyone can join, and some feel that to denominate some Mennonites and not others as 'ethnic' is to suggest that those groups are more authentically of the faith.²⁶ I typically present the term in scare quotes ('ethnic'), therefore, to indicate its status as a problematic term, unless I am quoting or otherwise representing a self-identification.

Finally, both First Mennonite Church and Holyrood Mennonite Church used the same hymnal, the 1992 *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, while River West used no hymnal, but rather overhead and later PowerPoint-projected sheets.²⁷ For First and Holyrood, therefore, I typically note the number of the hymn in a parenthetical shorthand that is often also used in Mennonite congregational bulletins: if the hymn is, for example, number 5 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, and the number has not already been provided in the fieldnote or interview narrative, I would indicate the hymn number with a reference like that at the end of this sentence (HWB #5). Worship songs are more commonly referenced, today, through the Christian Copyright Licensing International database; so, for the worship songs performed at River West and Holyrood, where available, I offer a reference to the CCLI song number, like this (CCLI #5).

An overview of the book

In this introduction, I have introduced the worship wars and my research investigating this musical conflict. I have also presented the book's main argument that aesthetics, not style or theology, are most deeply at stake in the worship wars. Drawing on anthropological and sociological perspectives on contemporary Christianity, I have tried to suggest some of the ways congregational music engages the body in performance and the ways that embodied performance ties music to memory and feelings.²⁸ I understand what church music accomplishes, then, in terms of an aesthetics of encounter, prompting me to explore the ways musical gestures (such as choices of instrumentation, melody or song structures, the relationship of music to text and so on) articulate