

# Influences of Modern Sacred Music

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Even upon the arrival of the nation's first settlers in New England, America's citizens recognized a division of sacred music into two categories: praise and edification. Although religious organizations were largely concerned with music's ability to edify churchgoers, Americans increasingly explored music that allowed them to praise God. At the same time, Americans must have recognized unique aspects of praise in the music of black slaves. Presently, a striking comparison of contemporary praise music and "slave songs" can be made. Furthermore, the extent of similarities between the two musical styles suggests that modern American praise music has been most closely influenced by

traditional African-American music.

Both modern praise music and the music of African-American slaves have largely relied on oral transmission. This means of preserving traditional African music was not immediately recognized by whites; many thought slaves had been forced to leave behind all aspects of the African culture (Crawford 72). However, slaves were continually found singing and dancing, and they readily learned to play musical instruments when they were given opportunities. In addition, black slaves held holiday festivals for energetic dancing and singing "in all the various languages of Africa," as one observer noted (73). Although blacks were still largely isolated to separate

plantations, they managed to contact each other enough to maintain cultural traditions (74). Within plantations, “slave songs” and spirituals were discovered and shared orally to strengthen morale in times of severe oppression (252).

Like the music of African-American slaves, contemporary praise songs are frequently passed along orally in spirits of encouragement. Notably, modern praise songs, their texts, and the religious settings in which they are performed encourage closeness to God. Although sheet music is now available for nearly every popular song, people most commonly learn praise songs by listening to them repeatedly during radio broadcasts or church performances. For example, contemporary church services now invite audiences to sing with only texts provided on screens; singers are expected to either recognize or quickly learn the performed tunes. Indeed, even when I am unfamiliar with songs played during contemporary services, I nearly always remember hearing the tunes in radio broadcasts. For those unfamiliar with the tunes, provided texts are followed and melodies are passed orally: listeners memorize the melodies sung by other performers.

Textual elements of modern praise music,

like oral means of transmission, also strongly point to African-American influences. The uniqueness of the texts sung by African-Americans was, perhaps, most carefully observed during evangelical camp meetings in the 1780’s to 1830 (Crawford 79). Black slaves who were invited to worship with whites eagerly participated in hymn-singing, and their desire to praise God led blacks to frequently continue singing late into the night! As an independent group in the late evenings, African-American worshippers sang their own texts. White listeners recognized significant repetition of short “riffs” of texts accompanied by call-and-response, regular choruses, and improvisational tune-singing. Accordingly, one observer described the songs’ texts as “short scraps of disjointed affirmations, pledges, or prayers lengthened out with long repetition choruses” (80). Although the brevity of textual phrases and repetition of phrases and melodies may have been disliked by some listeners, textual elements of contemporary praise music suggest that whites were certainly influenced by the black slaves’ style of musical praise.

Nearly all popular contemporary worship songs are excellent models of repeated “riffs” of texts and melodic phrases that reflect musical

traditions of African-Americans. One example is Jesus Culture's "One Thing Remains" (2010), which consists of four stanzas:

Higher than the mountains that I face  
Stronger than the power of the grace  
Constant through the trial and the change  
One thing remains (2x)

Your love never fails, it never gives up; it  
never runs out on me (3x)

Because on and on and on and on it goes  
For it overwhelms and satisfies my soul  
And I never, ever, have to be afraid  
One thing remains (2x)

In death, in life, I'm confident and covered  
by the power of Your great love  
My debt is paid; there's nothing that can  
separate my heart from Your great love

In a recording lasting 8 minutes and 40 seconds, all four stanzas of text are completed after only three minutes. The remainder of the recording—almost six minutes—includes a crowd and later Jesus Culture's vocalist, cheering, "Your love never fails!" and "It's a great love!" repeatedly.

Even shorter church and worship performances of the piece similarly include the emotional singing of extremely repetitive stanzas. Furthermore, textual repetition once considered insincere or "senseless," as one camp meeting guest remarked, is presently favored by singers wishing to open their hearts to God (Crawford 79).

Finally, the marked presence of bodily movement in both historical African-American and contemporary praise music suggests a direct relationship. During evangelical camp meetings, an observer noted that "every word so sung" by blacks was accompanied by the movement of bodies—the sinking of legs or tapping of feet (Crawford 80). Black slaves also substituted percussive physical motions for drums, which whites banned in fear of slave uprisings (250). African-American religious ceremonies were often followed by "ring-shouts," which seemed to fuse all elements of traditional African-American music. In addition to hand clapping and foot tapping, a newspaper reporter described another bodily phenomenon within ring-shouts: "The foot is hardly taken from the floor, and the progression is mainly due to a jerking, hitching motion, which agitates the entire shouter" (257). The African-Americans' union of music and bodily movement is plain!

Bodily movement similar to that of African-American music-makers certainly accompanies nearly all contemporary praise music. The first scene of *Soul Surfer* (2011) confirms this: Sarah (played by Carrie Underwood) leads a worship team at the back of a tent, and musicians clap

and sway as every head of church members and Bethany's family "bobs" to the beat of the praise song "Blessed be Your Name." Similarly, a live recording of Hillsong United's "Hosanna" shows a crowd of worshippers all with arms raised in the air, and not a motionless body can be picked out ("Hillsong United")!

Although the influence of African-American music on the bodily movement accompanying contemporary praise music has not been explicitly suggested, African-American influence *is* associated with physical movement inspired by American genres (Crawford 347). One source argues, "One of the most significant factors in the twentieth-century history of the Western body is... "Afro-Americanization" – largely the legacy of black music" (McClary and Walser). Furthermore, the lack of bodily expressions inspired by American music *prior to* African-American influences is emphasized:

"Even the greatest Western music, on the order of Bach and Mozart and Beethoven, was spiritual rather than physical. The mind-body split that defined Western culture was in its music as well"... Classical music is somehow decoupled from the body, while African-American music is not. (Benzon)

So, authors have concluded that African-Americans have introduced the unity of music and bodily expression to American musicians; performers of contemporary praise music must be included!

In summary, close similarities between traditional African-American and modern praise music suggest a direct cultural influence on the latter. The extent of these similarities also suggests that African-American music has been the most significant influence of contemporary praise. Oral transmission of tunes, simple and repetitive textual formats, and physical movement clearly characterize both musical styles.

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