SONGS OF SOLIDARITY: A NEW APPROACH TO LITURGICAL

MUSIC AND COMMUNITY COHESION

BY

MATTHEW E. JOHNSON

INSTITUTE FOR CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will focus on a single type of music used in a religious setting, namely congregational song, which I will broadly refer to as "liturgical music." Though liturgical music in the context of Christian community serves a variety of functions for community participants, this paper will focus on two major functions liturgical music plays in the way it facilitates community coherence: (1) it connects participants via embodied empathetic imagination to a particular defining narrative or mythology, and (2) it connects participants via co-performance directly to one another. I will suggest that liturgical art in religious community is actually a constitutive force in that community, having the capability of illuminating and affirming the communal identity shared by the participants. Participation in liturgical music is a way of actively shaping the community *as* a community, re-telling together a deeply held defining mythology in the context of the present world and creating a shared moment of co-performance in which participants enter into true face-to-face relationships with one another. Finally, I will illustrate how these functions may play out in a religious community through an analysis of Psalm 136's content and use in ancient Israelite liturgy.

INTRODUCTION

Most of us spend a large proportion of our time tapping our feet to the tunes trumpeting

in our headphones, on our stereo, in restaurants, in shops, and sometimes just in our heads.

Music is everywhere in our lives in all of its forms, from studio recordings to street performers,

from symphonies to singing on Sunday morning. It is a phenomenon closely tied to the ways we

think about ourselves and our communities that grows out of shared rhythms of life and common

ways of conceiving of the world.

In this paper, I hope to outline an attempt to unpack the ways in which music acts as a

force for community cohesion. While this occurs in virtually every community, turning songs

into national anthems or a genre of music into the lifeblood of a subculture, I will focus narrowly

on religious music in hopes of developing a framework that could apply more broadly. More

specifically, this analysis is directed at a single aspect of music used in a religious setting,

namely participatory singing of canonized songs, which I will broadly refer to as "liturgical

music." Identifying liturgical music as a necessarily communal and embodied activity, I will

suggest that it serves at least two major constitutive functions for the community: (1) it connects

participants by means of embodied empathetic imagination to a particular common mythology

and (2) it connects participants through co-performance directly to one another. I will then turn

to Psalm 136 for a revealing case study of these dynamics at work in the context of ancient

Israelite community life.

LITURGICAL MUSIC

For the purposes of this paper, I reserve the term "liturgical music" for a religious

practice involving communal participation in singing together in the context of a religious

service or ceremony. In a religious community, liturgical music serves a variety of purposes,

many of which are at play simultaneously to greater or lesser extents,[1] but for the present purposes, this paper will focus on the role liturgical music plays in *community identity confirmation* and *formation*.[2]

I suggest that this identity confirmation takes place on at least two levels. First, liturgical music has the capability of facilitating the participants' engagement with an underlying narrative or mythological content that is central to the community's identity; this engagement puts individuals in touch with the source of that identity, creating solidarity between those who hold it in common. Second, the liturgical music engages participants with one another in co-performance, allowing them to encounter each other in a moment of shared time. In these ways, liturgical music is a collaboration of community members in which they are able to engage with the vitality of the community's social life.

Liturgical Music as Embodied Empathetic Engagement with Mythology

The first level of identity confirmation in liturgical music takes place through the imagination. I suggest that in the context of canonized liturgical music filled with traditional practices and socially agreed upon meanings, imagination involves, explicitly or implicitly, an engagement with a communal *mythology*. Drawing from the work of Émile Durkheim, a mythology is a deeply held set of beliefs connected to the life of a society that reflects a template of its identity and of what it means to be a participant in that community.[3] A mythology,

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[1] When music is performed in a communal religious setting, it may be analyzed in terms of six aspects: (1) emotive movement, (2) doctrinal instruction, (3) a context for individual spiritual piety, (4) entertainment value, (5) artistic innovation, or (6) community identity confirmation.

[2] Much attention has been given to the tensions between the first five aspects, particularly with regard to recent Protestant evangelical worship practices. The literature in this area tends to centre around issues of cultural relevance, evangelism, or related theological issues, resulting in a discussion of liturgical music that tends to neglect its function for the community and favors the study of worship practices. Outside the bounds of this project is a theological examination of liturgical music as worship; instead, the emphasis will be placed instead on the functions of liturgical music for the participating community or society.

[3] Émile Durkheim, *Pragmatism and Sociology*, trans. J. C. Whitehouse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 87.

according to Durkheim, is given authority for a community as a result of its unanimous conception, as it is agreed upon by all community members as carrying a defining representation of guidelines and values for participation in community life.[4] Because these social guidelines carried in mythology typically find *narrative* expression in community life, a "mythology" is a particular narrative or set of narratives, historical or fictional, in which the community locates its identity.[5]

So how does liturgical music aid the community member in accessing such a mythology? Liturgical music is communicative by means of the listener's or participant's imaginative and empathetic engagement with the subject-matter; when participants engage the imagination in such a way that they empathetically step into the world of mythology, they are able to come into contact with and participate in the mythological identity of the community.

Imagination, here, is not simply a faculty in which we are able to represent non-existent objects in an abstract way.[6] James K. A. Smith (in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty) describes "imagination" as a "quasi-faculty whereby we construe the world on a precognitive level, on a register that is fundamentally *aesthetic* precisely because it is so closely tied to the *body*."[7] In the same vein, Mark Johnson writes that "reason and logic grow out of our transactions in and with

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[4] Ibid., 91.

[5] These narratives, in Western culture, are understood to be largely historical in nature. The community understands itself to have been formed as a result of historical events, sometimes with one central originary or definitive moment or story. For example, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ for the Christian tradition or the exodus from Egypt in the Jewish tradition. American nationalism also shares some of these features in its romanticization of the Revolutionary War and the lives and ideals of the founding fathers, for example.

[6] For example Sartre's definition of "image": "the image is an act which envisions an absent or non-existent object as a body, by means of a physical or mental content which is present only as an 'analogical representative' of the object envisioned" (Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 25). Sartre comes close here to the concept of embodied imagination in question but proposes instead that in initial perception, the perceiver synthesizes an "image" that serves as a shortcut for the later synthesis of a representation when the object is no longer present. As such, he remains attached to the idea of a representational image rather than a non-representational sensorimotor simulation.

[7] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 17.

our environment;"[8] thus, the only way we are able to make sense of the world is through the use of the materials provided by our perceptual and motor experience. That is, when we engage our imaginations, we are not synthesizing *pictures*; we are simulating the activation of previously activated sensorimotor systems. So *imagination* here, means a basic human capacity to simulate the *embodied* experience of being in the world based on past experiences.

In this way, not only is imagination tied to our bodies but also to how we relate to others (either interpersonally or in art) through *empathy*. Recent research into "mirror neurons," which investigates the cognitive processes involved in empathy, suggests that the human capability of empathy may be tied to the embodied simulation of sense perception, imagined from the other's perspective.[9] In response to this emerging stream of research, David Freedberg suggests that this speaks to blind spot in art theory because it describes the mechanism by which art communicates emotion in general.[10] Through imagination, an observer can empathize with a subject in a work of art or perhaps even the artist, stepping into that character's experience by synthesizing a simulation of sensorimotor experience, as if it was the observer's own experience. Entering into the world of the work of art allows the observer to experience empathy or emotion through imaginative simulation.[11]

[8] Durkheim, *Pragmatism and Sociology*, 13.

[9] Marco Iacoboni's work *Mirroring People*, outlines the groundbreaking discoveries in neuroscience over the past 30 years related to "mirror neurons." According to Iacoboni, these systems of mirror neurons activate both when a person (or animal) is acting and when watching another perform the same action. This suggests a connection between the motor system and perception, allowing for empathetic feeling. The discovery of this phenomenon took place during an experiment involving a macaque in Parma in the 1980's when a researcher noticed similar brain activation when the macaque reached for food and when the macaque observed the researcher reaching for food (see Iacoboni, *Mirroring People*, 12-16).

[10] David Freedberg, "Empathy, Motion, and Emotion" in *Wie sich Gefühle Ausdruck verschaffen: Emotionen in Nahsicht*, pp. 17-51, edited by K. Herding and A. Krause Wahl (Berlin: Driesen, 2007), 22-23.

[11] I follow Martha Nussbaum here on her definition of empathy as a neutral capacity. In contrast with its close but value-laden relatives pity and compassion, Nussbaum's conception of "empathy" describes "an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience, without any particular evaluation of that experience" (Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 302).

It is precisely this capability to simulate embodied experience that allows us to make sense of stories, and in turn, our community's mythology. James K. A. Smith suggests that "[t]here is an irreducibility to stories that can only be grasped by the imagination."[12] Apart from the ability to imaginatively enter into the story as if it was one's own experience, narratives in general would have no significance. I propose that liturgical music can carry forward, either in its traditional character or in its explicit lyrical content, the story of the community that sings together. Each member, through empathy, is able to enter into the world of the mythology that has been carried forward in the liturgical music and make sense of it through the imagination, and each member integrates it into his or her identity as a community member.

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LITURGICAL MUSIC AS CO-PERFORMANCE AND "TUNING-IN"

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Though the imagination connects participants in solidarity around a common source of identity, the community's mythology, it fails to adequately describe the way in which liturgical music syncs participants up with one another directly. This second level at which liturgical music serves to confirm a community identity emerges out of the work of Alfred Schütz on musical performance and the experience of inner time.

In his essay "Making Music Together," Schütz roughly defines "music" as "a meaningful arrangement of tones in inner time."[13] While outer time can be measured by a clock, in pieces of equal length, inner time is in constant flux, stretching and compressing according to our experiences.[14] "The flux of tones unrolling in inner time," Schütz goes on to explain, "is an arrangement meaningful to both the composer and the beholder, because and in so far as it evokes in the stream of consciousness participating in it an interplay of recollections, retentions,

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[12] Smith, *Imagining*, 59.

[13] Alfred Schütz, "Making Music Together," *Social Research,* no. 1:18 (March 1951): 88.

[14] Ibid., 89-90.

potentions, and anticipations which interrelate the successive elements."[15] In other words, when listeners actively engage with music, they remember melodies (for example) and anticipate their movement in certain ways (such as through dissonance to resolution). The actual movement of the tones, arranged by the composer and performed by the musician, plays with the listener's anticipations and expectations and is able to communicate unexpected things. When a listener is actively engaged in this way, Schütz describes the listener and performer as "tuned-in" to one another, sharing a common flux of inner time.[16] Perhaps explains why a symphony that clocks in at an hour in length is unbearably long for some listeners and flies by for others.

Schütz claims that this sort of tuning-in requires special training or else a natural gift on the part of the listener (as well as, of course, the performer).[17] According to Schütz, a listener who is unfamiliar with the mode of performance will be unable to "tune-in" to a musician's performance in a way that syncs up inner time. But between co-performing musicians, the tuning-in relationship is magnified: "each, simultaneously, shares in vivid present the other's stream of consciousness in immediacy. This is possible because making music occurs in a true face-to-face relationship—inasmuch as the participants are sharing not only a section of time but also a sector of space."[18]

In liturgical music where participants require no special training other than the ability to sing, I suggest that participants are still able to tune-in to one another through the process of singing the same song. Participants in this setting are co-performers, tuned-in to one another's inner time through the music as the intermediary. As Schütz suggests, this principle applies not

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[15] Ibid., 88.

[16] Ibid., 95.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

only to the fine arts where an orchestra plays and an audience listens but also to people sitting around a campfire with a guitar or congregants in the pews singing hymns.[19] When co-performers tune-in to one another, they experience the flux of one another's inner time and live the same moment,[20] "growing old together while the musical process lasts."[21] This, for Schütz, opens up the possibility of community identification through music.

Schütz's analysis illuminates this second level in which liturgical music is identity confirming for a community. In a situation where participants are gathered in a religious context to sing the same song, liturgical music holds the potential to connect participants together as co-performers who meet each other face-to-face, or voice-to-voice, in the same moment, building the same reality together. Whereas on the previous level, participants connected primarily to the mythological source of the community identity and only secondarily to one another, here, participants encounter one another *directly* and are connected to one another through liturgical music.

ISRAELITE PSALMODY: PSALM 136

The book of Psalms in the Hebrew Bible contains a wide variety of songs and hymns, ranging in tone and content from ecstatic celebration to tragic lament. However, of the many psalms that illustrate the two-fold identity confirmation dynamic of liturgical music, Psalm 136, a liturgy of thanksgiving (traditionally associated with the Feast of Passover), is perhaps the clearest, due of its participatory "call and response" format.[22] The refrain, "his lovingkindness is

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[19] Ibid., 96.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 95.

[22] A. A. Anderson, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Psalms (73-150)* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 893.

everlasting,"[23] [Hebrew: *ki le'olam hesedo* כי לעולם חסדו] which repeats every other line, is supported by a basic structure, helpfully outlined by A. A. Anderson:

> The structure of this poem is reasonably plain: verses 1-3 form the introit with its invitation to thank God; this is followed by the main section (verses 4-9), the deliverance from Egypt (verses 10-16), the entry into the Promised Land (verses 17-22), and God's care in general [verses 23-25]. Verse 26 resumes the theme of the introduction, and concludes the psalm.[24]

The Israelite mythological community identity, throughout the Old Testament, is explicitly rooted in history,[25] in an originary event that created the possibility for the existence and continuation of Israel as human partner of their God:[26] Longman and Dillard explain that "The nation exists—it receives its national identity—as a people in covenant with [their God]."[27] Psalm 136, then, clearly emphasizes this identity. It both tells the story of the exodus from Egypt as a defining event and also allows the participants to confirm its ongoing significance with the response "His lovingkindness is everlasting." This is a way of affirming the community identity as (vicarious) participants in the exodus and as inheritors of the subsequent covenant with the God of Israel. I suggest that the retelling of the story in this musical liturgical form allows participants to imaginatively enter into the mythological account of the exodus and to retell it through community co-performance, creating a solidarity between co-performers as vicarious participants in the actual originary (historical/mythological) event.

In support of this claim, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann contends that the

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[23] Psalm 136:1 NASB.

[24] Anderson, *The New Century Bible Commentary*, 893.

[25] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 78.

[26] Describing Israel as an example of "creational and covenantal monotheists," N. T. Wright says: "[W]hen creational and covenantal monotheists tell their story, the most basic level of the story for their worldview is *history*" (Wright, *The New Testament*, 893). According to Wright, Israel's self-understanding is rooted in originary historical events such as the exodus and subsequent covenant with YHWH.

[27] Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 114.

use of psalmody in Israel's community worship "functions characteristically and inevitably in the deployment and legitimation of social power;"[28] that is, Israel's worship is a way of constructing social dynamics. For Brueggemann, Israel's worship is a "process of 'world-building'" that "requires that society assert its world as authoritative, accepted as a given without doubt or reservation, and without any entertainment of a plausible alternative."[29] According to Brueggemann, Israel's social structure, as well as its hope for the future, is determined by the defining mythological narrative of the exodus from Egypt and resulting covenant with their God, which is reenacted in psalms such as Psalm 136. So the mythological content expressed in Israelite liturgy constitutes the supporting structure for Israel's social system. In this way, Brueggemann maintains that Israelite liturgical music is an act of "world-construction"[30] in which "[a] world of justice, mercy, peace, and compassion is created in the imaginative act of liturgy."[31]

The relevance of Brueggemann's position for the discussion of liturgical music as community identity confirmation is clear in his explanation of Israel's appropriation of the exodus memory from the past:

> The exodus memory, then, is not simply an old memory, but is news from *there* told *here*, news from *then* announced *now*. […] The repeated narrative account pushes powerfully into the present. The world is remade each time the liturgy is reenacted for the sake of the ones who wait to be liberated.

Imagination is involved in appropriating narratives from the past, making sense of the present, and hoping for the future. So in performing Psalm 136 together, Israelites imaginatively

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[28] Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), ix.

[29] Ibid., 13.

[30] Ibid., 14.

[31] Ibid., 53.

participate in the exodus as a defining moment in Israel's history, empathizing with their predecessors. This creates solidarity between the co-performers in the present. Performing together also allows co-performers to meet each other face to face in a moment of shared time, confirming one another's place in the social order. So liturgical music accesses a mythology that is "world-building," and the performance of it itself is *world-confirming*. Not only does it access the mythology that determines the structure of community identity, it also allows co-performers to confirm their participation in this structure as they encounter one another in the world of the performance. So the liturgical performance of Psalm 136 expresses the Israelite social order and allows participants to confirm their position in the social world, always in reference to the originary events of the Exodus mythology.

POSTSCRIPT

It is difficult to miss the culture-shaping and culture-expressing power of music, especially considering the influence of popular music in Western culture. Everywhere in our culture, we see music at the core of individual and group identity as communities gather around various forms of music. Musical performance has the power to unite a community in solidarity through connecting performers and listeners to the roots of that community. It also acts as an intermediary that connects community members to one another in a shared moment, tapping into the unique ongoing vitality of the community as a whole. When participants engage authentically with liturgical music, a moment of solidarity, of forming one voice, a moment of "growing old together"[32] with other community members is made possible, and the community confirms its cohesion. [33]

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[32] Schütz, "Making Music," 95.

[33] However, this analysis is relevant for only one aspect of liturgical music practice and is profoundly contingent upon the quality of member participation. In his discussion on the reception of public art, Lambert Zuidervaart proposes an "authentic co-responsibility" on the part of the artist and the audience. So while the artist

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has a responsibility to maintain authenticity in the process of artistic creation, the participant or beholder shares in a responsibility as well. To be an authentic listener is to make the performance "one's own." Zuidervaart explains, "'Making it one's own' means not only that one embraces it in one's own manner but also that the creative process receives the benefit of one's own dedication, openness, and critical judgment toward that which is being given birth." Apart from authentic participation characterized by this "making it one's own," a casual listener who encounters liturgical music will not take part in its benefits for community life.

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