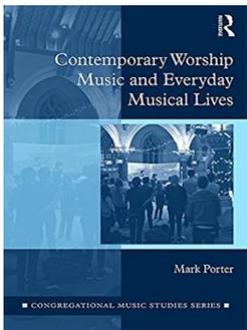


# [Review] Contemporary Worship Music and Everyday Musical Lives, by Mark Porter



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*If cosmopolitanism has now become an appropriate model for the current reality of everyday interactions with Contemporary Worship Music then it represents a significant movement beyond the societal models and concerns that led to the music's initial emergence. . . . Popular music has now found its place in the church and, as such, the marginalization of popular culture is no longer a concern that will drive change in the same way. . . . It is, then, almost to be expected that new models of the church's music should emerge. Whether these concerns will be the drivers of future change is a hard question to answer. (Porter 155)*

From my experience leading congregational song in a variety of contexts, I know that within every community are individuals who have strong, vocal opinions about musical style. The so-called “worship wars” (which many of us in the North American context are familiar with) seem to represent a broad negotiation in public discourse about the meaning of music and its fitness for worship. Personal preference is often seen as the driving force behind these “wars” and tends to create false binary oppositions: sacred and secular, contemporary and traditional, and, ultimately, good or bad. In *Contemporary Worship Music and Everyday Musical Lives*, Mark Porter brings to life the way preferences and ideas about music and worship are not simply negotiated within broad, inadequate binaries (though his interviews often employ them); rather, musical and worship preferences are formed and choices are made through ongoing, diverse negotiations.

If universal binary oppositions are inadequate, then how are people to negotiate their engagement with music-in-worship and music in the rest of their lives? What judgments can they make, and how are diverse values ordered and prioritized in those negotiations? Knowing that music is so deeply tied to identity, what is



the relationship between diverse musical experiences and identity formation in contemporary life? These questions are at the heart of Porter's work.

The book is an insider's academic account of the way people in England's St. Aldates church community related their "everyday musical lives" to the contemporary worship music repertory of their church—"moving between musical worlds," as Porter describes it (9). I say "an insider's academic account" because Porter was involved long-term as a layperson in the music and worship ministry at St. Aldates before returning to it as a site of academic study. In the book, Porter revisits a basic assumption about the use of much of contemporary worship music: that it is fitting and useful because of its close connection to the music of life outside of worship, making it relevant and attractive to churchgoers. Assuming that culture is much different in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century than it was when contemporary worship music emerged, Porter not only addresses changes in cultural conceptions but also considers the ethics of stylistic choices in music.

As a pastoral musician and a student of liturgy and Christian worship, I approached this book with an interest in the emerging field of Christian congregational music, the richness of its use of social theory, and the contexts and artifacts to which these emerging scholars have attended. The book is intended as a contribution to this field and is published as part of Ashgate's *Congregational Music Studies* series. I read with an eye to how Porter would make sense of the relationship between ethnographic methods and the practices of Christian worship, especially curious about how the book and its findings could be used in the work of researching, teaching, and practicing Christian worship.

I found it refreshing to read this book in the context of other religious studies and ethnomusicology dissertations that look at contemporary worship. A number of recent publications have focused on larger, parachurch events such as conference worship and worship leader gatherings. A longer-term, insider study of just one local congregation's engagement with contemporary worship brings a sense that the work has more immediate applicability to those of us who serve—or who teach those who serve—local congregations. I don't mean to downplay the significance of conference worship or worship leader gatherings and the way those events wield influence over local, weekly worship gatherings. For the everyday worshiper and pastoral musician, however, those "utopian" events (in the literal sense of the word as a "no-place") don't always translate directly to local concerns. Likewise, I don't intend to suggest that this study is, in fact, immediately and directly applicable and translatable to every church context; Porter's book is full of academic and theoretical jargon and is certainly not written (or priced) for a general readership.

In chapter 1, Porter gives a thick description of the ecclesiastical context of St. Aldates as a large Anglican church in the center of Oxford, England, that draws many young people from the nearby university. Chapter 2 introduces the key theoretical frameworks for the book. The following three chapters are built around the corpus of interviews that make up the core content of the research, revealing three essential dispositions: relating positively between different worlds of music (chapter 3); negotiating the difference in musical worlds by drawing practical and ethical boundaries (chapter 4); and how experiences in church become normative for all value judgments of musical experience (chapter 5). The last chapter before the conclusion (chapter 6) examines the way two periphery music-making spaces at the church contribute to Porter's assessment of the musical worship life of the main church gathering. The conclusion returns to the theoretical framework of cosmopolitanism and uses it to examine the interviews explored in the intervening chapters.

One of the study's most significant contributions is Porter's exploration of the construction of identity that happens in the negotiation of musical styles (chapter 2). Through the lenses of cultural theory and intercultural processes, Porter identifies "new cosmopolitanism" as the primary guiding framework for the cultural negotiation of diversity and difference and as an alternative to assimilationist or multiculturalist models. Porter uses a variety of academic sources to describe cosmopolitanism as an underlying framework or tool that allows people to identify themselves according to a wide range of markers (including age, race, ethnicity, nationality) at any time and for various reasons. Cosmopolitanism therefore allows the coexistence of seemingly diverse, rival identities that people can selectively draw from in the course of their everyday lives (50–51)—a feature Porter uses to understand the relationship between musical consumption patterns outside of worship and musical preference within worship (especially contemporary worship music) at St. Aldates.

Chapters 3–5 relate the testimonials of laypeople's experiences negotiating musical choices. Putting these testimonials of musicians and congregants on paper feels liberating to someone like me, who is always trying to think about the ways in which songs engage with meaningful worship practices, beyond just the theology of the text, the style of the music, or the sociological effects of group singing. Hearing congregants voice their associations is a kind of permission for church leaders to take seriously the various interpretive modes through which their congregation members engage with music. These testimonies of meaning-making within the framework of "cosmopolitanism" may help reveal the temptation that church leaders sometimes fall into, trying to overtly prescribe meaning-making for the congregation or limit the realm of possible meanings to those that we imagine will produce theologically orthodox Christian identity.

A reader looking for clear, succinct "findings" in Porter's conclusions about how people relate to music and worship within and outside of the Sunday morning context will likely be disappointed. Instead, what readers

will find is an account of the various kinds of negotiations individuals at St. Aldates make in their individual “everyday lives” and the musical life of the church. And, as Porter says, each person makes meaning “idiosyncratically”—that is, not in direct relation to the way others negotiate meaning in their lives. If the reader is able to hold onto Porter’s goals and conclusions amidst the academic theory that is impressively woven throughout the text, then many moments provide windows into the minds and cultures of his subjects—some who may sound similar to those in their own contexts.

Though Porter is looking at the world of contemporary worship music in a very specific and somewhat unique context, I wonder how his study might be extended into other musical contexts. What can his study help us understand about meaning-making with other congregational song genres, such as “global song” or the strophic hymn, and how might these other musics engage contexts that aren’t “everyday” or directly related to the popular cultural musical choices of highly educated university students and young professionals? I also wonder how far the reach of a cosmopolitanism framework goes, and about the diverse negotiations of meaning-making that are at stake in racially, ethnically, nationally, and socially diverse cultural contexts. Is Porter’s study more applicable to urban than rural contexts? I’m curious, that is, for whom this “new cosmopolitanism” is applicable besides the community at hand. Granted, descriptions or prescriptions for some imaginary universal context are altogether antithetical to the method of Porter’s research. But it is important to note these questions, lest readers assume a simple transference of this overarching identity-formation framework to individuals within their own contexts.

Mark Porter’s work in *Contemporary Worship Music and Everyday Musical Lives* advances the important conversation on the relationships between music, worship, culture, identity, and, ultimately, Christian formation at work in 21<sup>st</sup>-century ministry. Though not designed with pastoral concerns foremost in mind, this thick ethnography raises many important issues and questions for anyone involved in shaping the music ministry in the church. Porter challenges the commonplace ideas that certain musical styles are required to attract people to worship services. He shows instead that though that may be true for some, the issue is much more complex because, frankly, people themselves are much more complex.