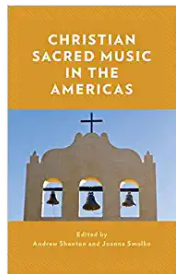


## [Review] *Christian Sacred Music of the Americas*, edited by Andrew Shenton and Joanna Smolko



### ELSEN PORTUGAL

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*Christian Sacred Music in the Americas* is a collection of essays by veteran and rising scholars in the Americas. The dialogues cover important topics such as indigeneity, colonialism, globalization, and the role of technology and media. The viewpoints and approaches reflect a broad spectrum of theological and cultural perspectives and Christian traditions. The goal of editors Andrew Shenton and Joanna Smolko is to “begin to fill in gaps in English language literature on South and Central American sacred traditions” (xii).

I found the introductory chapter remarkably thorough. A serious reader should not bypass it. In it the editors share lessons that they have found most valuable in each of the respective contexts addressed by the chapter authors. Although the volume's title may imply a geographical organization, the chapters are grouped into six parts, defined primarily by musical categories:

1. *Liturgical Music*. Chapter 1 discusses liberation theology as expressed in three Catholic masses in Brazil; chapter 2 describes recent preservation of Guatemalan choir repertoire.
2. *Hymnology*. Chapters 3 and 4 are dedicated to the revival of shape-note singing (Sacred Harp), while chapter 5 focuses on the hymn compositions of American composer Thomas Hastings.
3. *Contemporary Worship*. Chapter 6 describes the transition from Brazilian contemporary Christian music to the generally popular, foreign-styled contemporary worship music used in Brazilian churches; chapter 7 proposes a relationship between the North American contemporary Christian music scene and political and social aims.
4. *Paraliturgical Music*. Chapter 8 examines American composer Virgil Thomson's four-hymn collection *Hymns from the Old South*, once again addressing the presence of shape-note singing, and chapter 9 discusses lyrics that include the name and ideas about Jesus found in American popular music since the 1960s.
5. *Music*. Chapter 10 brings the reader back to the practice of shape-note singing, this time demonstrating the spread of such singing communities into other countries in recent



decades; chapter 11 follows the lengthy path toward the Americanization of sacred music within the American Anglican Church.

6. *Indigenous and African American Music.* Chapter 12 tells one story of an indigenous Christian in Brazil who combined her indigenous and Christian identities in her song, and chapter 13 explores the expression of Black theology in African American Christian music; chapter 14 explains how music played a part in the trajectory of the Choctaw and their acceptance of the Christian faith. The book concludes with an epilogue by Michael O'Connor.

These discussions of the music and contexts are scholarly and full of valuable information. Unfortunately, however, the collection does not present the vast range of sacred musical expressions from Central and South America that would be needed to fill in many gaps in the current literature. The majority of the essays focus instead on musics or genres originating in North America, with just two chapters on Brazil and one on Guatemala. To achieve a broader scope of sacred musical experiences in all or many geographical areas of the Americas, a more direct, targeted approach to discovering regional “rising stars” will be necessary.

Three fundamental (and potentially controversial) themes came to the surface as I read this collection, addressed through the volume directly or indirectly. The first involves the parameters of what should be considered *Christian sacred music*. Does the term refer to music written and performed by Christians? Does it suffice to have Christian themes? Is sacred music written primarily with the intent of worshiping God and proclaiming his Word? Is music composed by a nonbeliever sacred if it uses Christian themes or lyrics? The answers to these questions affect how we relate to and accept some of the discussions in these chapters, understanding the subjects as truly Christian or sacred. The three Brazilian masses addressed in chapter 1, for instance, display a high level of syncretism and would hardly be identified as Christian from a biblical standpoint. Their texts are disconnected from unique Christian doctrines such as Christ-centeredness, instead demonstrating the composers’ declared intention of the “mixing of faiths” (18) and promoting the “equality of religions” (19). Chapter 8’s core focus is Virgil Thomson’s *Hymns from the Old South*. Thomson was openly not a Christian. Is his work then sacred, or is it a secular rendition of culturally embedded religious compositions? Furthermore, chapter 9 suggests that secular songs with unorthodox or skeptical lyrics about Jesus and Christianity should be considered sacred in that they form a resource for religious scholars as well as for “Christians looking for ways to understand and articulate their faith in the modern world” (213). On the other hand, the author of the epilogue suggests that “‘Sacred music’ is that which allows itself to be led by the crucified prophet of Nazareth whose throne is a cross and who has cast down every monarch and emperor (Luke 1:52)” (336).

The second theme is not directly addressed, but it has to do with the categories by which the specific examples are arranged. Throughout the book we can identify multiple roles that musical genres, songs, and collections play in the life of a community, all with varied meanings both for the composer and the listener or participant. Given the spectrum of situations the authors address, this is understandable. However, groups of examples arranged according to music genre, or setting, or function, or role would have significantly enhanced this publication’s usefulness. The articles

discuss, for instance, compositions by a group of musicians and lyricists for specific performances (the Brazilian masses); folk-like songs by unknown composers blossoming as a genre among specific communities for an extended length of time (Sacred Harp singing); nationwide Christian music movements and motivating factors (or crucial moments of decision) that have led to a broad acceptance of a musical style (Brazilian Christian music); individual song compositions with personal and cultural meaning (Yakawa's song from her indigenous community in Brazil); and more formal (classical) compositions by established composers (Virgil Thomson's *Hymns of the Old South*). All of these expressions have a place in the worldwide sacred repertoire, and their appearance in this collection reveals a significant spectrum of musical experiences. Although this publication provides much information concerning the musical expression's relevance, meaning, and role, future publications will contribute greatly to the application of musical research, creativity, and the advocacy of authentic community practices by sustaining a more categorical approach.

The last of the three themes can hardly be overlooked by the serious reader: the question of racial prejudice and the evaluation of its effects on North and South American experiences, along with corollary concerns of social justice. In this volume, this theme first rises to the surface in an awkward mention in chapter 4. The author states that within a nineteenth-century news publication, a sales ad for a Black slave appears on the opposite page of McCurry's hymnal sales ad. This is not discussed further, so the reader is left wondering whether this brief mention is meant to question the hymnal editor's integrity, or to make a different point. In two chapters, including the epilogue, the authors employ ideologically charged terms related to racism and social justice. Anthropological and historical perspectives on the concepts of *race* and *culture* would have provided a more accurate assessment of the history of the Americas in the last 500 years.<sup>1</sup> In chapter 7, Jeff Warren states that Christian Worship Music (CWM) is mostly silent on social justice, but he overlooks the primary intent of the CWM genre: direct worship of God and expression of biblical doctrine. Warren criticizes Bethel Church pastor Bill Johnson's view of "justice," which he says includes "white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity" (167). So, while Warren implies that CWM has become "one way to achieve this vision of social justice" (167), he does not demonstrate any specific politically motivated aims in the creation of CWM songs. This makes it difficult to follow his prescriptions for what Christians *should* do: "They should consider the

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<sup>1</sup> Haviland, McBride, Walrath, and Prins define culture as "a society's shared and socially transmitted ideas, values, and perceptions, which are used to make sense of experience and which generate behavior and are reflected in that behavior. These standards are socially learned, rather than acquired through biological inheritance" (77). These authors describe the modern concept of race as a social construct but a false idea since human biology is not classifiable into sub-species—the actual meaning of a race (253).

Further, anthropologists Brian Howell and Jenell Paris explain the definition and applicability of the term race: "Race is a cultural category that divides humanity into groups based on selected phenotypical (appearance) differences. Racial categories and their meanings change over time. But it is not only racial categories and meanings that change over time; race itself is a cultural construction that hasn't always existed, doesn't exist in all societies, and changes over time in race-based societies" (79).



affiliations of the music. They should consider how it contributes to justice for the problems of today, from the COVID-19 pandemic to institutional racism” (169).

A good example of a scholarly examination of the interplay of cultures in the development of sacred music is Matthew Hoch’s chapter on American Anglican Church music. He affirms the undeniable influence of Black Americans on the music of the United States and underscores the importance of Afro-centric repertoire. In another example, Newby and Stearns in chapter 13 examine Black theology in song while focusing on the lyrics of the “Black National Anthem,” *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. They feature theologian Shawn Copeland’s “love ethic” that “calls everyone in the Black community into an identity found in Jesus, an identity formed by God’s particular love and presence in this community, regardless of suffering” (299). Copeland, quoted here, says, “The dark wisdom of the enslaved people teaches us that none of us is to be defined by victimization, but, like Jesus, by a commitment in the here and now to the realization of the reign of God. The dark wisdom of the enslaved people teaches us not how to avoid or deny suffering but how to suffer suffering” (299). In chapter 14, Emma Wimberg writes about the Choctaw, a people displaced by the conquering forces of the American government and forced to resettle after traveling the infamous Trail of Tears. Wimberg explains that the Choctaw hold the missionaries who brought them Christianity in high esteem: “Christianity itself is not currently seen by the Choctaw as a part of the oppressive white hegemony but rather as the assistance the tribe desperately needed while undergoing forced cultural change” (308).

Although only a small portion of American sacred music experience can be addressed in a single volume, this book can certainly expand any reader’s vision and understanding of the issues surrounding sacred music in the Americas. The studies display the enduring power of music, the multifaceted expressions of Christian doctrine and thought, and the depth of meaning that can develop from it for Christians in the Americas and beyond.

### References

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