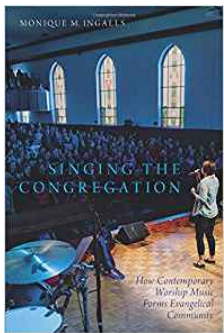


[Review] *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community*, by Monique M. Ingalls



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Ingalls, Monique M. *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 272pp. ISBN 978-0-19-049964-8.

Let's play the television quiz show Jeopardy.

Answer: Concert, Conference, Church, Public, and Online

Question: What kinds of congregations are singing contemporary worship music?

In *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community*, ethnomusicologist Monique M. Ingalls presents documented ways in which five social venues, widely participated in by evangelicals in the past fifty years, have resulted in common worship experiences through the singing of contemporary worship music (CWM). Drawing upon years of ethnographic field research, she provides data to posit that with the mainstreaming of CWM in North American evangelicalism, contemporary worship is now a model that crosses geographical and cultural borders. This trans-venue aspect of CWM has resulted in identifiable “congregations”—or social constellations—consisting of the worship concert, the worship conference, the local church, public praise marches, and audiovisual worship media (including online and digital), all of which share a common CWM canon. Ingalls concludes that the shared repertoire of CWM is a cultural product that both “reflects and shapes the concerns, convictions, and commitments of evangelical Christianity” (4). (Thankfully, Ingalls not only defines “contemporary worship music” and “evangelical”—neither of which is easy to define, given the widespread differing opinions on both—but she also substantively



elaborates on the historical uses of the terms to help situate her argument.)

Ingalls clearly states her purpose in writing this book: “The central aim of this book is to identify how the collective performance of contemporary worship music shapes the activities that evangelicals define as ‘worship’ and how these musically centered performances have brought into being new . . . ‘modes of congregating’” (4). As a result of her research, she concludes that CWM has become a “shared cultural product” that freely crosses boundaries from mode to mode (“congregation” to “congregation”), each of which employs CWM as the primary means to worship. For these congregations, music is worship and worship is music; as people sing in these contexts, they share worship in common.

Ingalls’s main point is that evangelicals now find themselves identified by how they “structure their music-making, experience worship, and ultimately understand themselves as a religious group” (1). In essence, CWM has become a sociological phenomenon that transcends contexts and shapes an identity for evangelical Christians, not only in North America but also throughout the world, because of the heavy North American influence that conditions worship in countless cultural settings. The widespread adoption of CWM has resulted in “an increasingly important way that churches position themselves in space, within the contemporary religious landscape and marketplace” (112). In the case of local church congregations, this has resulted in “niche congregations”—the intentional creation of identity based upon contemporary worship music, independent of the local context. In other words, identity is based on CWM rather than on the church’s zip code.

The book consists of five rather freestanding chapters, each of which addresses one of Ingalls’s five congregations (concert, conference, church, open march, media-driven). In each one she reports the findings of her field research. She also references the work of other ethnomusicologists who corroborate her use of terms and ideas as applied to her work, an aspect that is helpful to the reader and demonstrative of integrative research. Photographs are included in each chapter. She also provides a substantial and helpful introduction and conclusion.

This book is largely a report of Ingalls’s findings from her doctoral research and dissertation. The author does not seek to provide a theological or practical argument for or against contemporary worship but reports as a researcher who draws appropriate conclusions essentially free of opinion—an approach very appropriate to her role and purpose. At the same time, she “seeks to reimagine and reinvigorate the analytic categories of ‘congregation’ and ‘congregational music’” (5).

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the wider sociological, cultural, and historical perspectives related to trends in contemporary worship over the past fifty years. While offering detailed snapshots of “congregations,” the author also pans out to help the reader see how they have resulted in a symbiotic interconnection—not intentionally but organically. In fact, speaking from the standpoint of a practical theologian, this book begs for Ingalls or someone else to take the next step, to see what it would look like for these congregations to heighten their awareness of the degree to which they influence one another and discuss any intentionality they discern to be appropriate to bring to bear upon evangelical Christianity. Having offered that suggestion, then, in my opinion the conclusion (“Worship Music on National and Global Stages: The Mainstream Model and Its Alternatives”) is worth reading on its own merit. The author offers some noted reactions to the trends she reports on,¹ raises final questions, and restates her hope that her volume will contribute to the academic conversation revolving around worship music today. With the influence of this important book, Ingalls’s hopes should be realized.

¹ Not everyone accepts the consensus held by many evangelicals that contemporary worship music is or should be considered “mainstream” today. Ingalls offers examples of reactionary alternatives, including the retuned hymn movement, the development of modern hymns, decentralizing music in worship in favor of the return to historic liturgies, and embracing multiethnic worship music.