

## The Aesthetics of Contemporary Worship Music: A Defense of Simplicity

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**Abstract:** *Christian contemporary worship music, when compared to other genres of music, will not sound as innovative, technical, or impressive. This music will strike one as rather simple. One might conclude that this music has a comparable lack of both aesthetic value and musicianship. This essay is an exploration and defense of the aesthetic value, artistic phenomenology, and ethical significance of Christian contemporary worship music. After laying out the function of Christian contemporary worship music, I draw out three norms of Christian contemporary worship music—simplicity, predictability, and user-friendly keys. I then argue not only that contemporary worship music is aesthetically valuable in virtue of these features, but that it also comes with a unique kind of artistic agency. Furthermore, the music itself helps cultivate a specific Christian virtue: simplicity.*

**Key Words:** *aesthetics, artistic agency, Christian contemporary music, ethicism, moderate moralism, religious music, simplicity, worship*

Christian contemporary worship music, modern praise and worship music with rock band instrumentation, when compared to other genres of music, will not sound as innovative, technical, or impressive. This music will strike one as rather simple. One might conclude that this music has a comparable lack of both aesthetic value and musicianship. This essay is an exploration of the aesthetic value, artistic phenomenology, and ethical significance of Christian contemporary music. I argue not only that contemporary worship music is aesthetically valuable, but that it also comes with a unique kind of artistic agency. Furthermore, the music itself helps cultivate a specific Christian virtue: simplicity.

This essay is structured as follows: I first illustrate some varieties of religious music, and then I lay out the concept and purpose of Christian worship music in section two. Section three describes the subsequent norms and features of worship music. I then argue that these features constitute aesthetic merits in section four. I then turn to artistic agency in section five and argue that there is a unique kind of artistic agency exemplified by performing worship musicians that is surprisingly complex and

difficult. Lastly, I consider the ethical implications of contemporary worship music and its connection to the Christian virtue of simplicity.

### The History, Criticisms, and Concept of Worship Music

Religions, and their distinct denominations, have held various attitudes towards the use of music. Some even take a negative view of music. Certain early forms of Buddhism which focus on the permanent nature of the transcendent devalue the fleeting physical world with its changes. This focus away from the changing physical world discouraged engaging in artistic enhancement, including musical enhancement, of meditation in favor of quietness and solitude.<sup>1</sup> Some Muslim groups, following their interpretation of the Qur'an, have banned music altogether.<sup>2</sup>

Of the religions that do incorporate music, the functions that the music play vary tremendously depending on the context. Buddhist monks have used choral chanting as a way of preserving teachings, and some scholars have even cited instances of these monks making corrections to written texts on the basis of such chants.<sup>3</sup> Chinese Buddhists use music as a funeral ritual to consecrate food as an offering to ensure the dead will cease suffering and experience rebirth in Buddhist heavens.<sup>4</sup> Even in settings where religious music is meant for audience participation, there are different functions and subsequent intended experiences. Tibetan Buddhist monks participate in mass choirs that can involve up to ten thousand participants at annual ceremonies.<sup>5</sup> The function of such large audience participation in music is to dissolve one's sense of self into the larger religious body. This, in turn, is meant to alter one's state of consciousness, causing one to rise above the "profane phenomenal world"<sup>6</sup> into a sort of trance state.

Although Christian worship settings also involve audience participation, we will see that the purpose is very different from the aforementioned practices. Of course, Christian worship settings and music also vary widely across denominations. Though the function of such music largely remains the same across denominations, not all will lack artistic innovation and technicality. Lay persons and scholars acknowledge that

<sup>1</sup> Ian. W. Mabbett, "Buddhism and Music," *Asian Music* 25.1 (1993): 9–28.

<sup>2</sup> Guy Beck, "Religious and Devotional Music: Northern Area," in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, vol. 5, ed. A. Arnold (Routledge, 2000), 246–58.

<sup>3</sup> Francesca Tarocco, "Buddhist Music," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Tarocco, "Buddhist Music," 6.

<sup>5</sup> Mabbett, "Buddhism and Music," 23.

<sup>6</sup> Mabbett, "Buddhism and Music," 24.

there are great works of music with Christian themes and written for performance within a liturgical context, such as the variations of “Ave Maria” and the religious works of famous composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach. I will not be dealing with these classic works in this article. Nor is my focus on modern liturgical styles of worship consisting of a pipe organ and choir singing, although some of what I say will also apply to this style. My focus is on contemporary praise and worship music, with instrumentation including electric guitar, drums, bass, piano, keyboard, and vocals. This music is used most frequently in Protestant denominations, and especially the Evangelical church.

This movement has two different roots.<sup>7</sup> One is in the Latter Rain movement of the Pentecostal denomination in the 1940s. The central tenet of the Latter Rain movement is a restoration of a particular kind of worship which focuses on praise, hence the often-heard phrase “praise and worship.” Reg Layzell, a Pentecostal pastor, was the forerunner sparking this emphasis on praise. The other, and more scattered, root originated in the United States and focused on evangelism. This focus on evangelism led to a desire for a specific music style to bring the Christian message in a modern form. Appropriating the popular music style and instrumentation of the time appealed to a broader and younger audience. The Jesus People movement of the West Coast of the U.S. stationed largely at Calvary Chapel constituted one prominent branch of this root. Through the 1960’s and 1970’s, they began writing Christian music intended to be played both in large public performances and in church settings with pop and rock instrumentation. In 1971, Maranatha! Music released its first album from this church and heavily influenced contemporary worship music.<sup>8</sup> Both of these movements culminated in what is known as Contemporary Praise and Worship music. Bands and musicians from the 1980’s and 90’s include Delirious?, Michael W. Smith, Hillsong United,<sup>9</sup> and Sonicflood. Modern artists include Kari Jobe, Lauren Daigle, and Matt Redman.

Upon first listening, such music will not immediately strike one as impressive aesthetically. Both the music and the lyrics might seem insipid.

<sup>7</sup> For a helpful and unique overview of the history of contemporary worship music, see Lim Swee Hong and Lester Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Abingdon, 2017). They note that the underlying driving force behind these movements is biblical interpretation and application, not musical style. It would be helpful to also mention Ruth and Lim’s book *History of Contemporary Praise and Worship* (Baker, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> A more concise history is given in Lim and Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus*.

<sup>9</sup> Although many contemporary worship bands are from North America, Hillsong grew out of a Pentecostal church in Australia.

This is even more the case if one is a Christian coming from a denomination with deep historical roots. For instance, contemporary worship music in the Protestant traditions pales in comparison to the rich tradition of art in the Orthodox tradition, including the latter’s icons, mosaics, sacerdotal vestments, and stained-glass windows.<sup>10</sup> For the non-religious, the music one encounters while attending a modern Evangelical church service will seem like a watered-down rock or pop concert. Notable Christian artists have even extended this evaluation to a perceived incompetency on the part of Christians as musicians.<sup>11</sup> They are not very good at art, and there is some kind of hindrance to good art-making that comes with being a Christian, or a religious person, in general.

To evaluate these criticisms, let us bring out the implicit expectation of art and the conception of art experiences which grounds it. When one claims that a certain music is boring or bland, they are listening to the music with the expectation of being impressed or deriving a kind of enjoyment from it. This is a widespread expectation from art, and contemporary worship music does not fare as well in this respect.<sup>12</sup> However, this mode of engaging artworks is foreign, and even antithetical, to the nature of Christian worship music.<sup>13</sup> To show why, and to begin constructing an aesthetics of contemporary worship music, we should seek clarity regarding what makes any piece of music “worship” music. What is worship? What kind of role does worship music play? Christian worship takes many forms and some, including simple acts of service or even one’s daily occupation, can occur without any occurrent thoughts about God. However, in the context of a Sunday church service, there is a specific form of

<sup>10</sup> For a full theology and history of iconography in the Orthodox Church, see M. Fortounatto M. Cunningham, “Theology of the Icon,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 136–49.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Gungor, “Michael Gungor on the Problem with the Christian Music Industry,” *Tov Rose*, April 23, 2016, <https://www.tovrose.com/2013/12/04/michael-gungor-on-the-problem-with-the-christian-music-industry/>. He describes Christian music in general as “disingenuous,” “pretending,” and “having a blander sheen.”

<sup>12</sup> This attitude echoes the enlightenment mindset which culminated in Kant’s conception of art that grounds both its status and value in a kind of disinterested pleasure. One is meant to contemplate the artwork for its own sake, disregarding any practical benefit it might provide, with the aim of enjoyment.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Vaishnav devotional musicians also deplore music for its own sake and thus discourage technicality or improvisation. See Beck, “Religious and Devotional Music,” 247.

worship that involves deliberate attention to God in the activities. Theologians have given various definitions for this form of worship,<sup>14</sup> but the following given by Wolterstorff captures the essence succinctly:

... worship of God is a particular mode of Godward acknowledgment of God's unsurpassable greatness.... [I]t is that mode of acknowledgment whose attitudinal stance toward God is awed, reverential, and grateful adoration.<sup>15</sup>

On this conception, worship involves explicit intentional thoughts about God, and two aspects are worth noting. First, by "Godward," Wolterstorff means that one is oriented towards God in the sense that God is the object of one's attention and attitude in worship. Thus, unlike the Tibetan Buddhist choirs, the focus of the singing is not towards a certain kind of trance experience, but an object-oriented emotional expression towards something else, namely God. Second, the specific attitudes one takes towards God are positive ones such as awe, reverence, and gratitude. One who is expressing an attitude of anger, envy, or confusion towards God could not be said to be worshiping him in this sense. Following this conception, we can say that worship music is music which is meant to elicit feelings of awe, reverence, or gratitude towards God.

Furthermore, contemporary worship music is written and performed in the context of *corporate* worship. That is, worship music is meant to elicit worshipful feelings and thoughts in a group of persons simultaneously, and thus meets three conditions central to joint activities.<sup>16</sup> First, everyone's attention is focused on the same object, God. Second, everyone has an awareness of the other members' attention on God. This is accomplished through hearing and participating with others by singing. Lastly,

<sup>14</sup> Famous examples include: "The worship of the church, then, consists of individual, corporate, public, and private service for the Lord which is generated by a reverence for a submission to Him who is totally worthy" (Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* [Moody, 1999], 428); "Worship is to feel in the heart.... Real worship is, among other things, a feeling about the Lord our God" (A. W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* [Christian, 1985], 82); "Worship is our innermost being responding with praise for all that God is, through our attitudes, actions, thoughts, and words, based on the truth of God as He has revealed Himself" (John MacArthur, *The Ultimate Priority* [Moody, 1983], 127); and "Worship is the activity of glorifying God in his presence with our voices and hearts" (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. [Zondervan, 2020], 1236).

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Eerdmans, 2015), 26.

<sup>16</sup> See Nick Zangwill, "Listening to Music Together," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (2012): 379–89; and Margaret Gilbert, "Walking Together: A Paradigmatic Social Phenomenon," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 15 (1990): 1–14.

this group singing is a deliberate intent to cooperate among the individuals. One's singing in this context is meant not only to express and elicit one's own feelings, but also to encourage and reinforce the feelings of the entire group participating in the music.<sup>17</sup> Like the Tibetan Buddhist choirs, one's experience as being part of a group is central. However, unlike the Tibetan practice, one maintains one's sense of self during a Christian worship service; one is aware of oneself among others as a group of separate cooperating individuals.

This purpose of evoking the joint activity of worship stands in contrast to the previously mentioned experiences expected of other artworks. Instead of the music being an end in itself, an external object (God) is the focus. Additionally, the music is not primarily aimed to evoke pleasure or enjoyment but engaged with for the sake of evoking attitudes of admiration, gratitude, and reverence towards God. These latter emotions might be enjoyable, but the enjoyment itself is not aimed at intrinsically.

### Norms of Worship Music

With the purpose of worship in mind, certain norms follow and are evident in the current practice of worship music. I will list and describe three.

#### Simplicity

By simplicity, I mean the quality that describes the lack of complexity in the structure of the object or activity. For music, simplicity denotes a lack of complex timings, chord structures, and melodies. Contemporary worship music usually employs two or three very basic chord patterns with simple structures. This is intentional. The church body sings this music together, and having a simple structure allows everyone, including new congregants and those not musically inclined, to catch on quickly and participate easily. John Dyck has similarly noted that simplicity in country music "is good for building community. Simple melodies are easy to learn, so they can spread faster."<sup>18</sup> The same holds for contemporary worship music.

Additionally, and in accordance with the purpose of worship, simple worship music is designed to *not* be attention grabbing. Since one's focus is meant to pass through the music and onto an external object, simplicity

<sup>17</sup> This is similar to the Hindu Bhajan, one of the most ubiquitous forms of religious music in northern India. For an overview, see Beck, "Religious and Devotional Music," 254.

<sup>18</sup> John Dyck, "The Aesthetics of Country Music," *Philosophy Compass* 16.5 (2021): 6.

in musical arrangement will help avoid attracting one's attention. Simplicity also occurs at the level of individual instruments—any one instrument should not be too grandiose. The worry is that any superbly impressive instrumentation will shift one's focus to the music itself rather than being a conduit for one's focus.<sup>19</sup> Wolterstorff echoes this point regarding liturgical worship music:

When the music is so powerful, so striking, so novel, or so difficult to sing—or so bad in quality!—that the attention of the people tends to be drawn to itself, then it is no longer a humble servant of the liturgy ...<sup>20</sup>

For instance, one will rarely find anything like a sweep arpeggio, shred picking, or complex hammer-on pattern on any lead guitar part for a worship song. This does not mean that there are no instrumental sections; many worship songs have instrumental breaks. However, even in these instances the instrumental parts blend in with the rest of the chord changes so as not to stick out. They will follow the chord progression in a complementary manner, with the goal of evoking the intended emotions. Often, the instrumental part will mimic the melody, such as the instrumental breaks in “Reckless Love” by Cory Asbury.

### Predictability

A song can be simple without being predictable. Think of Claude Debussy's “Claire De Lune.” For a piano piece, this work is relatively simple, but it is not predictable. The piece seems to meander and wander aimlessly from section to section. Predictability is a crucial quality for contemporary worship music in its setting for many of the same reasons simplicity is. As opposed to singing out of a hymnal, contemporary worship is usually not accompanied by sheet music indicating where the melody will go. Usually, only the lyrics are displayed on overhead screens. If the melody is not predictable, it will be hard to join in if one is unfamiliar with the particular song. This is not too problematic if the song is played often, but if any church body wants variety in their music, then predictable songs will lighten the load cognitively for the worshipping community. After hearing the verse or chorus a couple of times, the melody sticks in one's

<sup>19</sup> This simplicity is not unique to the practice of worship music. Some electronic music makers have recently been creating music specifically designed to be listened to while studying or working. Because the music is meant to help one focus on an external activity, the best “work” music will also have a simplicity allowing one to hear without focusing on. For this same reason, such music will rarely have lyrical content at all since the sung words will tend to shift one's focus.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Eerdmans, 1980), 185.

memory.

Additionally, not all people will have a familiarity with worship music in general or the current songs played at a specific church gathering. Some persons might have recently started coming to church or come from a different culture with radically different religious music. To accommodate this fact, and ensure ease of group participation, the sung melodies and chord progressions need to be predictable. This allows any new person and those not musically inclined to join in quickly and effortlessly. Anyone who has attempted to join in singing an unfamiliar worship song will know how easy it is to catch on to the melody.

Like simplicity, predictability also ensures that one's attention does not shift to the music itself instead of God. Unpredictable melodies, although potentially more aesthetically exciting, draw one's attention to the tones themselves and invite one to listen closer to the music. This invites an observing, rather than a participatory stance to the music and goes against the focusing aspect of worship: one is supposed to look *through* the music towards the divine.

### User Friendly Keys

Given the focus on producing *corporate* worship, most worship music is written to be covered and played by groups of musicians other than the original artists. These local musicians within a church will vary widely in terms of experience and skill level. Many musicians at smaller churches will be volunteer, not professional, musicians. This creates a norm that concerns the musical performance given the actual structure of instruments: most worship songs should be played in keys with chords and melodies easy for most musicians. For some instruments the key will not matter much. Guitar players can simply place a capo on the fretboard to allow the player to move the open notes to any desired key, and they can play open chord finger patterns in obscure keys rather easily. With other instruments, such as the piano, the finger pattern changes completely with different keys, so playing in common keys like C, G, and D is more accessible for beginner players.

Vocal parts are especially important when determining keys. For while the music played on instruments involves only the band, the lyrics are meant to be sung by *all* members in a worshipping context. This means that skilled singers should shy away from notes and keys that hit impressive high notes because the vocal register of an average person will not be able to hit them. Furthermore, the average register will differ greatly across persons. This means that worship artists should cater to the narrow range of notes that are comfortable for all persons to sing in. Booming lows or impressive highs will hinder persons whose natural range leans

the opposite way. Most male singers will perform at the top end of their full voice register. This is the range at which females can sing comfortably full voice and males can sing an octave lower.

### The Aesthetic Value of Contemporary Worship Music

Given the purpose and norms of worship music, it is not surprising that this genre is sometimes unappealing to listen to for its own sake. The simple and predictable nature of the music will not impress or thrill. The instruments are not novel or technical. The vocals will not showcase the singer's abilities, and the music will never venture into odd chord changes or movements. But this music was never designed for any of these purposes. As Jesse Prinz has pointed out, it is just as big of a mistake to listen to punk music for technical prowess or musical innovation because this is antithetical to the amateurish rebellious nature of punk music.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, trying to listen to worship music for entertainment or groundbreaking artistic novelty is like trying to use a hammer as a doorstop. It is not the best at doing this job, and there are better alternatives out there because the hammer was never meant to keep doors open.

However, the fact that contemporary Christian worship music is fit for its function does not establish that it is aesthetically valuable. Even if worship music is suited to fulfilling its purpose of evoking gratitude, awe, and adoration to God, one might worry that I have demonstrated it does this *despite its aesthetic flaws*. At best, one might think, I have been conflating values here. The fact that music encourages a fitting attitude to God, although valuable, does not make it better *qua* music. That is, the ethical value of contemporary worship music does not necessarily improve its aesthetic value.

There are two separate thoughts here which deserve attention: one is that mere fitness for a function is not an aesthetic merit, and the second is that although the specific worship function has ethical value, this does not entail aesthetic value. To combat these objections and bridge the gap, the fitness for function or the ethical value must somehow translate into aesthetic value, and I will now argue that both do.

While it is controversial to claim that seeming fit for a function counts as an aesthetic merit in itself, this is not the only way that seeming fit for a function can increase aesthetic merit. For once we see an object as falling under a certain category, this knowledge allows us to perceive various qualities as standard, variable, and contra-standard with respect to that category. Roughly, standard properties for a given category C are ones

<sup>21</sup> Jesse Prinz, "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock: Punk Music Aesthetics Identity Taste," *Philosophy Compass* 9.9 (2014): 583–93.

whose absence tends to disqualify the object from belonging to C, variable ones are ones that make no difference whether the object belongs to C, and non-standard ones are those whose presence tends to disqualify the object from C.<sup>22</sup> Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson illustrate how this perceptual shift of focusing on an object's fit for a function can lead to aesthetic effects in one's phenomenological experience of the object as follows:

... this happens when the functional category used to perceive the object causes it to appear as having few contra-standard or variable features, but only standard ones .... [C]onsider an elegant-looking stove, perhaps a sleek stainless-steel model. Its elegance can be said to "emerge" out of its function, in the sense that it is elegant insofar as its visible features (for example, a glass door, a set of burners) are all standard for the functional category in which we perceive it.<sup>23</sup>

If one were to look at the same object as a safe, it would lose its appearance of elegance and sleekness because certain features would go from being seen as standard to contra-standard. The burners would stick out and make the object appear clunky and awkward. This same categorial perceptual shift occurs with worship music. When we listen to, and participate in, contemporary worship music for what it is, certain features become standard and can be aesthetically appreciated in light of their function. The simple and predictable instrumental parts, vocal melodies, etc. take on a sound of elegance, subtlety, and delicacy that would make the same music bland if it were heard as a rock opera or ballad. Similarly, other features that would normally be merits become flaws. A technical guitar solo would strike one as distracting, garish, or gaudy. Thus, worship music's ability to perform the function, although not necessarily an aesthetic merit in itself, shifts our perception of the music's features so that they become aesthetic merits.

The second objection shifts to the function itself and claims that while there might be ethical value in contemporary worship music, this does not make the work aesthetically better. This objection assumes that the ethical qualities of artworks are completely independent of the aesthetic value, but there are good reasons to deny this. There are two prominent views regarding the relation between aesthetic and ethical values. Defenders of

<sup>22</sup> This terminology is taken from Kendall L. Walton, "Categories of Art," *The Philosophical Review* 79.3 (1970): 334–67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183933>.

<sup>23</sup> Glenn Parsons, *Functional Beauty* Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson (Oxford University Press, 2008 ), 97–98.

the ethicist and moderate moralist position<sup>24</sup> argue that some ethical merits of artworks, qua *ethical* merits, are pro tanto (to that extent) aesthetic merits and vice versa for ethical flaws. One argument for this position starts from the idea that all artworks aim at a certain response in the audience, and when an artwork attempts to evoke a response that is not merited by the represented object, this is an aesthetic failure of the artwork. Thus, when an immoral response is prescribed, it is unmerited and constitutes an aesthetic flaw. Berys Gaut writes:

the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works, such that, if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious.<sup>25</sup>

His argument is roughly that artworks, especially literature, prescribe certain attitudes towards objects. To the extent that an artwork prescribes an attitude towards an object that it does not merit, the artwork is aesthetically flawed. For instance, if a horror movie were to prescribe fear towards a monster that is not dangerous or scary, it would to this extent fail as an artwork. To take an ethical example, a tragedy that prescribed pity towards a protagonist that was unlikeable and hard to sympathize with would fail as a tragedy. This merit condition holds for positive attitudes as well. *Schindler's List* is a great movie partly because of the way it portrays, and thus prescribes admiration for, Oskar Schindler. If an artwork prescribes a pro-attitude towards something immoral, such as the Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, it is to that extent aesthetically flawed because it prescribes an attitude that is not merited, much like the horror movie that prescribes fear towards a harmless villain.

The other popular view called moderate autonomism claims that while ethical merits or demerits might have an aesthetic impact on an artwork, it is never in virtue of their ethical qualities *as such* that do this work.<sup>26</sup> The moderate autonomist would not deny the effects of ethical aspects of artworks, but if a thriller failed to thrill, or a horror movie failed to evoke fear, because of an ethical flaw, it would not be the ethical dimension

<sup>24</sup> See Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 36.3 (1996): 223–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/36.3.223>.

<sup>25</sup> Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, rev. ed., ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 182–203.

<sup>26</sup> For a defense of this position, see J. C. Anderson and J. T. Dean, "Moderate Autonomism," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 38.2 (1998): 150–66.

doing the work, but just the fact that the movie fails to elicit the intended reaction. Only a radical autonomist, who denies any connection between ethical and aesthetic values, would be committed to denying these effects.

Despite this disagreement, both main camps agree that sometimes ethical merits or demerits affect the aesthetic value of an artwork, and it is this plausible thesis that is necessary to argue that Christian contemporary worship music is aesthetically meritorious to the extent that the emotions evoked are fitting responses to God. Most worship songs manifest adoration of God because of his ethically admirable characteristics: sacrificial love, forgiving nature, desire for justice, etc. Since the adoration, gratitude, and reverence are responses to God's ethical perfection, the corresponding attitudes which contribute to the aesthetic merit of Christian contemporary worship music are ethically commendable, and thus improve the songs aesthetically. This is better brought out when contrasted with a worship song that manifests an immoral attitude, and thus fails as a worship song. Consider the lyrics of the Hymn of General Kim Jong-un, which was ordered before every social event in North Korea in 2023. The translated lyrics are as follows:

Our General is the wisest of 10 million  
Our General cultivates the best paradise  
With the power of love for our everlasting happiness  
His name is General Kim Jong-un.<sup>27</sup>

This hymn is a worship song in praise of the North Korean dictator. It is meant to be sung in a group and to evoke feelings of gratitude and admiration for Kim Jong-un. However, those who know the oppressed state of North Korean citizens will feel a resistance to participating in this hymn. Even if successful in singing along, one will most likely feel a strong internal tension. The hymn fails to evoke admiration because Kim Jong-un is a ruthless dictator and the prescribed attitudes of the hymn are unfitting. This failure to evoke the appropriate attitudes makes this hymn worse *as a worship song*, and thus less aesthetically meritorious than the Christian counterparts in this regard. Since the Christian conception of God is an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being, Christian worship songs are better suited to evoking appropriate attitudes and are thus better worship songs than the Hymn of General Kim Jong-un.

Nevertheless, these ethically meritorious aspects are just pro tanto contributions. There might be countervailing aesthetic demerits which make a particular song overall aesthetically bad, but the presence of these

<sup>27</sup> For translation, see <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/song-11152023155401.html>.

aspects will make the artwork less bad than it would have been. One could take the argument further and add that the *most* ethically commendable attitudes are the ones manifested by worship music to God. If one thinks that the degree of aesthetic value tracks how ethically commendable the attitudes manifested by the work are, one might conclude that contemporary worship music is among the most aesthetically valuable artworks, but pursuing this would take us too far off track.

To conclude this section, the features of contemporary worship music I listed make it both fit for its purpose and manifest ethically meritorious attitudes. If what I have argued in this section is correct, then these features contribute to the music's aesthetic value by playing both of these roles, and the worries about my defense of contemporary worship music are misplaced. Christian contemporary music's simplicity, predictability, and playability contribute to its aesthetic value.

### Worship and Agency

We are now in a position to explore the practical ramifications of this conception of worship music for musicians. Contrary to what one might think given the norms described in the previous sections, playing worship music demands a unique kind of agency from the musician. This is because playing worship music comes with a particular mode of playing, namely playing *worshipfully*. Far from being easy, playing worshipfully is a difficult task because it is complex. Although what I say will apply to all musicians, I will illustrate this by exploring the agency of a worship lead guitarist phenomenologically as this is the role I have the most experience with from playing in worship bands.

First, a brief word on difficulty, complexity, and their relation. What makes an activity difficult is very simply, that it requires a lot of effort.<sup>28</sup> Which aspect requires effort, however, will vary. Running a marathon is difficult because of the physical effort required. One aspect that can make an activity difficult is its complexity. Building a computer, performing brain surgery, or understanding the economic system of Europe are all difficult *because* they are complex. Still, complexity is neither necessary nor sufficient for difficulty. Marathon running is difficult, but not complex. Communicating in the English language is complex but not difficult, at least for typical English-speaking adults. My claim in this section is that playing worship music, and more specifically playing such music worshipfully, is more difficult than playing non-worshipfully because the *mode* of playing from an agential perspective is more complex.

<sup>28</sup> For a defense of this account, see Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

Let us contrast the agency of a worship musician with a non-worshipping musician from the first-person phenomenology. Consider jazz musicians playing in a bar or classical musicians playing in a concert. Their goal in these performance settings is to entertain people and provide enjoyment. Of course, this would be a hard goal to *directly* aim at in playing an instrument. Rather, the musician's agency is focused on a more basic action, playing the music well, with the ultimate goal of entertaining others. What "playing music well" amounts to varies according to the performance setting. If one is following a score, then what the musician is trying to do, at a very basic level, is play the notes with the appropriate touch and timing. Jazz musicians improvising will focus on their playing and attempt to enter a flow state while keeping awareness of the other musicians and the chord changes at play.

This goal of entertainment contrasts with the goal of worship musicians. Drawing on the previous sections, we can derive norms for the worship musicians from the purpose of the music. If the aim of worship music is evoking awe and gratitude to God, then one's goal as a musician is to *not* be the focus of attention. Rather, the stage in a worship setting is meant to inspire worship both auditorily through the music and visually through the performers' bodily stance and expression. The audience is invited into worshipping by seeing the musicians as exemplars of embodied worship to be imitated and joined with. Musicians play the music and worship, which comes through in their bodily expressions. Of course, the goal for the musician is not simply to feign all these outward appearances of worship, but to actually lead authentically by feeling and expressing worshipful emotions in the hopes of worshipping alongside the church body.

This is where the musical agency becomes more complex. Returning to the conditions for a joint activity, the worshipping musician, if she is to worship along with the congregation, must direct her attention to God, be aware of other members' attention, and have an intent to cooperate with them. One might think the task is to worship *while* playing. This is already more complex than the goal of a normal performing musician, as one's agency is bifurcated. Let us take the lead guitar player as an example. She could worship by listening to the lyrics or even singing along while playing her part. If successful, she would be playing and worshipping at the same time. This is more difficult than simply playing the music because one must now perform two tasks at once. One must play the instrument and pay enough attention to the lyrics to evoke certain feelings through them.

Notice, however, this agential process is bifurcated into one of worshipping through the lyrics and playing one's instrument. Although this

accomplishes the task of worshiping jointly with others, it leaves one's playing as peripheral to, and perhaps distracting from, one's act of worship. This is akin to a juggler who performs while simultaneously balancing a rod on his nose. One is performing two tasks which detract from each other and split one's focus. To see why this is less than optimal, we can consider singing as the ideal mode of the kind of worship under consideration. When the audience or performers sing, they worship *through* their singing. As a worship musician, it would similarly be ideal if one's worship was somehow accomplished through one's playing.

There is thus a further ideal for a worship musician: to worship *through* one's playing, and this kind of unified agential experience as a musician is challenging. Once one's focus is shifted onto one's playing, the notes become forefront and one's focus is shifted to trying to "get it right" for the sake of others. And how is one to keep an awareness and cooperate with others in worshipping through this process? As to the first task of attention, one way for a lead guitarist, although not necessarily the only one, is to utilize the power of one's imagination. Our imagination allows us to see and hear things *as other things*,<sup>29</sup> as when child imagines a clump of mud as a pie. Our recognitional capacities depend upon this capacity: I recognize a friend I have not seen in years when I imagine this face I currently see as the old one I knew. Through imagination, a lead guitarist can imagine the notes played *as words being sung*. This imbibes them with a meaning and allows one's attention to pass through them to God, as if one is speaking through one's playing.

To take a specific example. The lead guitar part in the chorus of the song "The Stand" by Hillsong Worship consists of a series of two notes played between lyrics. Guitar players can imagine those notes as words interwoven with the lyrics as follows (guitar notes in italics):

What can I say (*Lord...Oh Lord...Oh Lord...Oh Lord*) What can I  
do (*Lord...Oh Lord...Oh Lord...Oh Lord*) But offer this heart oh  
God (*Lord...Oh Lord...Oh Lord...Oh Lord*) Completely to You.

By imagining the notes as words, an agential unification is made between guitar playing and worshiping through one's playing. The musician is now playing *worshipfully*. One's thoughts are directed to God, and the notes come to express one's awe and reverence through the semantic content of the imagined words. This allows one's focus to pass through the notes to God. The notes, like the sung words for a congregation, become a conduit for one's attention to pass through and the proper emotions are

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion on imagination's capabilities, see P. F. Strawson, "Imagination and Perception," in *Experience and Theory*, ed. L. Foster and J. W. Swanson (University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), 31–54.

evoked.

What about the task of keeping awareness of, and cooperating with, others? When ideally done, these notes-imagined-as-words one plays complement the sung lyrics, as in the above example. The guitar player's worship experience is not like saying a private monologue simultaneously while others are singing their own song to God. Rather, the notes-imagined-as-words echo and complement the lyrics of the song so that the thoughts associated with the guitar notes are not just *my* thoughts, but *our* thoughts expressing a group's adoration, reverence, and gratitude. One's playing will then be heard as words coordinated and involved with the singing of everyone in the church body.

Although I have exemplified what this kind of worship artistic agency looks like for lead guitar players, this task of playing worshipfully confronts all musicians performing worship music. Far from being simple and easy, this kind of artistic agency is difficult, partly because one must come up with *ways* to do it. I described one way a lead guitarist might achieve worshipping through one's playing, but it will not be practical for a percussionist. They would have to imagine drums and cymbals as having lyrical content, but this seems implausible. Rather percussionists can imbibe their bodily movements with meaning; to think of them akin to dance movements expressing their adoration and gratitude. How would a pipe organist, who utilizes both hands and legs, achieve the aim of worshipping through their playing? The sheer difficulty of utilizing all limbs usually demands all of one's agential capacity.

Playing worshipfully is thus difficult due to its complexity, but the complexity takes a particular form. When one merely plays and worships at the same time through sung lyrics, a musician's agency is directed towards two different actions at once. However, playing *worshipfully* is difficult because one must develop a higher order of agency with respect to the same action. One must be able to perform the action on the first level (play the music) with sufficient skill in order to form intentions at the second order (worship). This is analogous to developing higher orders of agency with respect to driving a car. At the first level, one drives a car by operating the gas, brakes, steering wheel, etc. to move a vehicle from one place to another. However, once one is sufficiently skilled in driving at this first level, one can develop higher order agency and intend to, say, drive *aggressively*. One does this by cutting others off, speeding, rolling through stop signs, etc. These actions are done by doing the first level acts in a certain manner. The same higher order of agency must be developed to play worshipfully. One must master the instrument well enough to begin to do other things with one's playing.

One might push back by pointing out that worship musicians, when



experienced, perform at this higher level without much effort, and their performance is thus not difficult. I have two responses. First, we must keep in mind that difficulty is a relative notion.<sup>30</sup> Heifetz, the violin virtuoso, can play Paganini caprices effortlessly, but this is still a difficult task because these pieces are difficult for average violin players. Similarly, seasoned worship musicians perform a difficult task easily because of their experience. Second, my claim here is only that playing worshipfully is more difficult than playing non-worshipfully. Playing worshipfully takes on an entirely different goal and the agency that comes with it is unique among performing musicians. Normal musicians only have to focus on their playing. Worshipping musicians must take their playing and develop a higher order level of agency. This raises the level of complexity and subsequently, the skill required to succeed.

Of course, there are many instances of playing an instrument non-worshipfully that will be more complex and difficult than many instances of worship playing. My claim here is a comparison about the mode of playing with respect to the same piece of music. If the goal was simply to play the part correctly, even doing so operating at the limit of one's skill would be successful. In contrast, to play worshipfully, one must have enough skill to be able to play the part comfortably enough for one's thoughts to be directed elsewhere while keeping awareness of one's participation with a group. It is not *what* is played that is more difficult, but *how* it is played.

### The Virtue of Simplicity

Part of describing the aesthetics of any art practice is to explicate the values shared by that particular art community which are manifested through the art. I have already laid out some of the attitudes towards God that Christians value explicitly evoked in worship music. To complete the aesthetics of contemporary worship music, I will describe one other value of the Christian faith embodied by such music, having a character of simplicity. There are two ways this character trait manifests, in lifestyle and as an attitude when approaching God. Worship music embodies and encourages both.

The general character of simplicity is a gentle, humble kind of contentment. This character manifests itself in different manners. It is most clear in the realm of material goods: simplicity manifests as the virtue to live modestly in content. The vices on either end of this virtue are extravagance and asceticism. Simplicity is best seen when contrasted with the

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion on the relativity of difficulty, see Bradford, *Achievement*, 27.

former. When one lives extravagantly, one regularly partakes of fine dining, wears expensive clothes, and generally has a taste for the exquisite things in life. The extravagant person's contentment in life depends upon such luxuries. A simple person, although able to appreciate these things, generally chooses to just enjoy the basic provisions of life. This difference is not a matter of being able to afford different lifestyles, but rather a matter of what it takes for one to be content. A simple person is just happy to have the standard things of life. Someone living the same way as a simple person, but yearning for finer things they cannot attain, is still extravagant in this sense I am speaking because their happiness depends on luxury, or perhaps the status that comes with it.

The contentment resulting from simplicity, as manifested in the Christian faith, is unique in one respect. It is grounded in one's satisfaction from knowing God. It is because one finds contentment in something other than the niceties of life that one is able to be content with little. This is not an explicit value judgment, comparing everything else to the value of knowing God. Instead, the knowledge, including relational knowledge, of God intensifies the satisfaction of simple things in life: food, friends, clothing, etc. Part of the satisfaction comes from a perspectival shift; one sees these things as gifts from God.

In addition to being manifested in one's lifestyle, this character of simplicity is reflected in one's attitude towards God. The French theologian and Archbishop Francois Fenelon writes:

God would behold in you a simplicity which will contain so much the more of his wisdom as it contains less of your own; He desires to see you lowly in your own eyes, and as docile in his hands as a babe. He desires to create in your heart that child-like disposition so distasteful to the spirit of man, but so agreeable to the spirit of the Gospel, in spite of the infection of a scornful and contemptuous world.<sup>31</sup>

Just as we do not need extravagant things to be content, nor do we need elaborate arguments or complex thoughts to be in relation with God. Indeed, Fenelon's warning is that such expectations come with a reliance on one's own intellect rather than God. At worst, such a need for "deep understandings" is a desire to flaunt one's wisdom for outward status, much like extravagant clothing. One will then slip into assuming that one somehow knows God better because of superior theoretical knowledge. This

<sup>31</sup> Francois Fenelon and Madame Guyon, *Spiritual Progress, Or, Instructions in the Divine Life of the Soul: Intended for Such as Are Desirous to Count All Things But Loss That They May Win Christ*, ed. James W. Metcalf (Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1853), 108.

is not the humility with which Christians are called to approach God.

Simplicity is thus reflected both in one's lifestyle and attitude when approaching God, and contemporary worship music exemplifies both aspects. Sometimes, the contentment is explicit in the lyrics, such as the chorus of and title of Hillsong United's "Christ is Enough":

Christ is enough for me  
 Christ is enough for me  
 Everything I need is in You  
 Everything I need

Here the expression of contentment in God is explicit. Additionally, the humble attitudinal stance with which one is supposed to approach God is embodied in the form of the music. The lyrics themselves are simple and straightforward. No complex metaphors or similes are employed. The musical form is also elementary. Only four chords are utilized in the entire song in a straightforward rhythm. Yet through these basic provisions, one is prescribed to express adoration, gratitude, and reverence *joyfully*. This invitation to engage with such music joyfully presumes the expression of the same contentment which is manifest in the modest lifestyle of the simple person. There is no need for Armani suits or Michelin star meals to be joyous. There is no need for complex arguments or theological acumen to know God, and there is no need for stunning musicianship, profound chord changes, or fanciful rhythms to be aesthetically content.

This music's cultivation of virtue is another ethical aspect that enhances the artform's aesthetic merit. Since this stance of simplicity prescribed by the work comprises ethically commendable attitudes, such a prescription constitutes a further aesthetic merit of worship music. Simplicity is not itself the attitude one is to take towards God. Rather, simplicity is constituted by other attitudinal states which are themselves ethically commendable. For instance, in a simple posture, one has humility towards oneself by seeing oneself as dependent on God. Correlatively, simplicity is also constituted by contentment in God. Both attitudes are ethically meritorious and thus make the worship music which prescribes them pro tanto aesthetically meritorious.

### Conclusion

I have attempted to illuminate the nature of worship music, what its norms are, how such norms affect the artistic agency of worship musicians, and this music's ethical value. If what I have argued is correct, there is an agential and ethical richness that comes with contemporary Christian worship music. The agential issue is an instance of an underexplored topic in aesthetics. Philosophers working in ethics explore the ramifications of

ethical theories in agential issues such as praiseworthiness of actions, first person deliberation, weakness of will, and other issues. Such a discussion in aesthetics regarding aesthetic agency from the artist's point of view is surprisingly lacking. How do norms and art practices affect the agency of the artists involved? How do aesthetic virtues and vices manifest themselves in various artforms and practices? This article is partly an attempt to shift towards such a perspective in philosophical aesthetics.