

Weaving Community: Paperless Music for Worship Christian World

For most of its history, and in many cultures around the world today, the church has sung without the assistance of hymnbooks, projectors, or even instrumental accompaniment. In this workshop we will explore the power of communal singing by heart and by ear. Through simple techniques such as call-and-response, canon, and repetition of a refrain we will discover how paperless music can weave us together as a community. No musical experience necessary – everyone can sing!

What is Paperless Music?

“Paperless music is a way of singing that has been practiced in communities around the world since people have sung. It is a way of teaching and leading song without notes or words written on paper. Music is taught through call and response, patterns are established, and music making begins.”

Emily Scott

Teaching Leading singing with singing

Different from Choral Conducting

Teaching and leading music without paper requires a different set of skills than choral conducting. Of course, there is some overlap, but paperless song leaders are working within an aural/oral musical world, whereas conductors come from an essentially literate tradition. If you are a literate musician or a choral conductor, you may need to retool a little bit in order to most effectively lead paperless music.

Leading Singing with Singing

A central feature of paperless music leadership is the emphasis on modeling rather than explaining. A non-verbal vocabulary of body language is developed for the purpose of teaching music; over-reliance on wordy explanation is avoided. The old maxim of “show, don’t tell” is invoked because the “showing” involves a different part of our brain than the “telling.” “Explanations stop the singing and shift participants’ thinking to a cognitively different (more skeptical) kind of listening... Explanations engage the part of our brains that think there is a right and wrong way to do things,” writes Donald Schell, one of the leading practitioners of paperless worship.

Teaching a piece phrase by phrase

Because we are learning by ear and by heart, people need to be taught a song in short, manageable pieces. Once each small piece is secure, then the song leader can have the group sing the whole. Paperless song leaders have different ways of indicating when they wish to have the group listen to them sing the line and when it is time for the group to sing. Simple gestures, like pointing to oneself to indicate “Listen!” and then raising a hand in an inviting way to show it is time for the group to sing, can be very

effective. A popular and effective technique to show relative pitches for the group to sing is raising one's hand to different levels for each note. This gesture can also help to indicate rhythm.

Dividing a group into two or more smaller groups

Different songs call for different ways of dividing a group up. Some songs are effective when sung by "low voices" and "high voices", others work best with mixed groups in different locations in the space. Try to create a group using only body language. Walk over to the group of people you'd like to sing first and face them, turning your back slightly to the group who will not be singing. Sing the phrase you'd like them to learn. Then use your hands to clearly indicate that particular group, and make eye contact with the folks sitting in that section. Eye contact is key.

Encouraging a pattern to continue

Once a group has mastered a phrase or pattern of music, a gesture may be required to have them continue singing it. Another group or a cantor may then be brought in to add another layer to the piece. A nod of the head or a circular motion of the hand may help to indicate your intention to the group.

Knowing when a piece is established

It is very important to give clear signals to a group so that they can feel confident in their singing. If you have been clear and methodical in your teaching then the group will be confident and the music will become "established" quickly.

Ending a piece

Listening to the group is essential. The authority of the song leader is not that of a dictator, but simply the one designated by the assembly to help the group to find its voice. Throughout the process it is important to lead with generosity and humility, understanding oneself as a member of the whole group. Once a song is embraced by the group, the group will decide when it is time to stop. The role of the song leader is to listen for that moment and then, with a simple gesture, give permission to end.

Forms of Paperless Music

Simple Melody. Sung in unison by the assembly. These pieces rely on the beauty of the melody itself. They are often composed such that the singers are able to intuit the underlying harmonies and begin to improvise as they sing.

Echo. A cantor sings a line, and the congregation sings it back.

Canon. A simple melody, sung by two or more groups, beginning at different times to create harmony.

Call and Response. A cantor sings a line (the call) and the group sings a line back that is different from the call. Some call and response pieces are made up of multiple calls, each with a different response.

Layered. The assembly is divided into groups, and each group has its own part to sing. Often layered pieces are “built” from the bottom up, so that the assembly can hear the harmonies as they are created. Layered pieces sometimes feature a cantor singing a descant that floats above the harmonies of the assembly.

Calling a strophic hymn. Each line of a longer hymn is called out by a cantor and the assembly repeats it back. Works best with a melody that’s familiar, but the accompanying text is lengthy and not committed to the assembly’s memory.

Music that Makes Community

www.musicthatmakescommunity.org

“Music That Makes Community is focused on developing and renewing oral practices of singing together, and is grounded in a theology of welcome and generosity. The main activity of MMC are four three-day events held each year in North America: in California in the winter, in New York City in the Fall, and in two other locations in other regions of the US and Canada in spring and summer. At these events, leaders from a diverse pool of skilled and talented musicians introduce ways of singing together that make transformative experiences of wholehearted engagement possible for people from across the spectrum of musical experience--from professional, trained musicians to folks who confess to mouthing the words to hymns for fear of being heard singing. Each MMC event is unique; leaders and participants learn together by doing as they sing, share stories and join in conversation about the power of music to bind us to one another and to God.”

Core Values: A Holistic Approach to Church Music

www.musicthatmakescommunity.org/core_values

Whether our music is new, ancient or world music, our practice is committed to renewing tradition and supporting a spirituality of singing (including the singing we do from text and paper). It is important to clarify which types of singing experiences we are offering an alternative to and why:

- This practice is not anti-book (i.e., hymnal). Certain forms require written music, but some forms do not. Singing without books or screens is a relational and human way to sing, it builds community and strengthens our ability to sing together in any context by emphasizing listening and awareness.
- This practice is not anti-instrument (you can sing with organ and without paper, for example) but there is a strong value here placed on the primacy of the human voice and the negotiation of shared leadership that we experience in those times we sing together without instrumental lead.

- This practice represents a bridge between “traditional” and “contemporary”; we find traditional vs. contemporary a false dichotomy. Oral traditions are old and have existed at some point in many cultures, and some cultures today are still exclusively oral, but to many this practice can seem very new, or at least different.
- Singing “by heart” can sometimes be misunderstood as simply singing from “memory”; the distinction is important. Our emphasis is on leadership, not memorization. We are cautious as we lead to avoid saying, “we all know this song...” Introducing a song this way can exclude (unintentionally) visitors and even some regulars. Along with traditional musical forms we are offering the corresponding teaching and leading methods of those traditions – imitation, call and response, and so forth – all of which make it possible to sing from heart without prior memorization.
- Paperless music is not an all-or-nothing musical choice for congregations – our intention is that paperless offerings will supplement and enhance what congregations already do, offering them more tools.
- In addition to techniques for leading communal music making, we are also exploring how we gather physically, the ways in which rearranging the space and positioning our bodies within it changes our sense of being a group.

Additional Resources

For a wealth of books, web links, videos, and articles on paperless worship, visit:
www.musicthatmakescommunity.org/resources

Music By Heart: Paperless Songs for Evening Worship (Church Publishing; 2008)

Evangelical Lutheran Worship (2006)

Shorter Songs for Worship series (John Bell and the Iona Community, GIA)