



Using Short Songs in Worship

Short Guide No 20: Using Short Songs in Worship

The New Testament encourages believers to sing 'Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs', suggesting the Body of Christ needs a range of sung material. As well as hymns, the imaginative use of short songs of various kinds can enrich worship; this paper explores the repertoire of shorter songs and suggests ways of incorporating them into services.

Chorus is the name which has sometimes been given to short songs (for example, those published by the C.S.S.M. in the first half of the twentieth century); many, like 'Trust and obey', were originally refrains from hymns. More recently the term 'chorus' has tended to give way to 'worship song'. This designation can refer to music in a broad range of contemporary styles and forms, including hymn-like songs with multiple verses—such as Graham Kendrick's 'The Servant King'—but also much shorter songs, like 'You are my hiding place' by Michael Ledner.

Chants (in the context of short songs) are usually simple songs designed to be repeated a number of times, such as those from the ecumenical Taizé Community in France. When the tempo is slow (as in 'Wait for the Lord'), the music is highly conducive to reflection and meditation, and may lead into silent prayer. Chants with a faster tempo (such as 'Laudate Dominum') are ideal for expressing joyful praise. 'Eat this bread' is often sung while the people move forward to receive bread and wine. The repertoire, much of it by Jacques Berthier and normally sung in 4-part harmony or in canon, can be enhanced with instrumental parts and vocal descants, all available in the Community's publications.

Margaret Rizza has also composed a number of chants, as well as more elaborate sacred choral music. Her chants include 'In God alone is my soul at rest', 'O Lord, listen to my prayer', 'Calm me, Lord' and 'Silent, surrendered', all designed for contemplative worship. Her music, mainly published by Kevin Mayhew, is also enriched if one or more solo instruments is available to play on some repetitions. Margaret Rizza has spoken of using simple meditative song to help quiet our busy and distracted minds in preparation for the stillness of prayer, leaving self behind. Her music is suitable for retreats and quiet days as well as public worship.

'Shorter songs for worship' is the subtitle chosen by John Bell, from Scotland, for three collections of material developed by the Iona Community's Wild Goose Resource Group, *Come All You People*, *There Is One Among Us*, and *We Walk His Way*. They include songs of commitment, for example 'Take, O take me as I am', invocations of the Spirit as in 'Come, Holy Spirit, descend on us', settings of short liturgical texts, such as 'Kyrie eleison', 'Alleluia' and 'Agnus Dei', prayer responses and songs from the world church (e.g. 'Uyai mose', 'Come all you people', from Zimbabwe).

Single verses or refrains from hymns may be useful as a sung grace before meals (such as 'All good gifts around us' from 'We plough the fields and scatter') or a doxology at the end of worship: 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow' is the best known but there are other possibilities, including the final verse of 'Ye choirs of new Jerusalem' in the Easter season. An appropriate verse from a hymn of dedication may be sung quietly as a response at the end of a challenging sermon. Certain hymn verses could be sung at the climax of the Eucharistic Prayer in a Communion service.

Short songs taught by rote can be useful in all-age worship and other contexts where literacy levels vary or different languages are spoken. Repetition obviously aids memory, so phrases of Scripture set to music can help to build biblical literacy; John Bell's 'Send out your light', based on a verse from Psalm 43, is one example. Singing phrases from the Bible repeatedly can be a way of letting the word of God 'dwell richly' within us (Colossians 3:16).

Short songs like 'Siya hamba' ('We are marching in the light of God') from Africa are not designed for singing just once, but gain their effect cumulatively. 'Our God is an awesome God' by Rich Mullins (originally the refrain of a longer composition) is an example of a short song which can build up powerfully by starting slowly and softly with tempo and dynamic level increasing as the song is repeated. One advantage of open-ended repetition is that it can be extended as necessary to cover movement or some other kind of action.

In a service where most of the music takes the form of hymns, a single short song sung once will feel rather weak; better to repeat it a number of times and / or to combine it with one or more other songs in a medley, giving thought to smooth musical transitions between the songs. Repetition is a classic feature of contemplative prayer (for example using the 'Jesus Prayer') as well as being associated with charismatic renewal (repetition of a whole song and often also a particular phrase). Some find it very helpful, though others have less positive reactions, so it is important to be sensitive in using repeated songs. There are also ways of combining short songs or sung acclamations and responses with spoken text which separates the repetitions—the Wild Goose collections of shorter songs give plenty of ideas.

Some suggestions for using short musical units

- Repeating a short song, with words appropriate to the season or the theme of the service, while people gather for worship.
- As a way of helping people focus on God in prayer or praise while visual images are displayed.
- As a sung response between spoken intercessions, engaging the emotions as well as the mind, and fostering the participation of all in the prayer.
- To ease the transition between exuberant sung praise and quieter adoration, silent prayer, a reading or a sermon.
- To enable the simple expression of trust amidst pain, when a community is bewildered or grieving.
- To support reflection on a particular aspect of a Psalm or other Bible passage by singing an appropriate phrase at intervals during the reading or at the beginning and end.
- To accompany symbolic action (such as receiving bread and wine, lighting a candle at a prayer station, or untying knotted string to express commitment to working for freedom and justice).
- To accompany movement, perhaps to another part of the building or as the congregation leaves.
- To express solidarity with the world church by singing a song from another culture, perhaps in another language.
- Using chants from the Taizé Community in a service of prayer for Christian unity, for peace or for healing.
- Using a sung 'Kyrie eleison' ('Lord, have mercy') during the confession to slow down the pace of the spoken word.

Anne Harrison – February 2016 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland
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