

STEUERNAGEL, MARCEL SILVA. *CHURCH MUSIC THROUGH THE LENS OF PERFORMANCE*. CONGREGATIONAL MUSIC STUDIES SERIES. EDITED BY MONIQUE M. INGALLS, MARTYN PERCY, AND ZOE C. SHERINIAN. NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 2021. 210 PP. \$43.99.

In modern church services, congregants in the pews sometimes struggle with how to actively participate in worship without seeming irreverent. Should they use their arms as a gesture of praise? Should they dance as they sing along to the hymns? On the platform, church musicians wrestle with issues related to how they approach the performance of church music—performing without “performing”—while church music planners and leaders question if musical innovation should be allowed on the platform. *Church Music through the Lens of Performance* investigates church music both theoretically and as a discipline within the scope of performance. Steuernagel’s goal is to develop a vocabulary through which the performance of church music can be discussed without participants “falling prey to the ‘worship war’ rhetoric, in which one perspective defends itself against others” (4). This revised understanding of performance allows the discussion to bridge the gap between pew and platform (2).

In his introduction, Steuernagel addresses the topics of performance and presentation of church music. He asserts that all participants in church music are performing (4). He discusses the term “performance” and how it has been used throughout church music scholarship, highlighting one definition that describes it as a “twice behaved behavior,” a simultaneous dynamic of presenting and doing (23). For the study of church music, he calls for a blending of theory and ethnography through points of intersection called “nodes.” He details these nodes as “play and change,” “making special,” “embodiment,” and “ritual.”

Chapter 1 provides an overview on the study and scholarship of congregational music. Steuernagel applies new vocabulary to performance studies and church music, terms such as “nebulosity” and “feathering.” These new word formations acknowledge that within the juxtaposed opinions on church music as performance, there are blurred lines and conceptual boundaries that overlap (23). He closes this chapter declaring that church music is both presentation and participation in a form of ritual worship.

In chapter 2, Steuernagel examines ritual as an overlapping concept

between theology, liturgical studies, and anthropology, citing the work of Tom Driver and Richard Grainger. He introduces three nodes related to church music and performance—repetition, transformation, and participation—while posing the question of what constitutes legitimate worship. He reminds the reader that ritual repetition shapes a congregation by “form[ing] deep grooves in people’s souls” (47).

Ritual and the participation or failure to participate in ritual is examined in chapter 3. The author uses Csikszentmihalyi’s “Concept of Flow,” which details five modes of engagement or ways to examine how congregants participate in worship music. He closes the chapter by discussing “immersive spectatorship,” which is how the public receives and participates in church music beyond the sanctuary through various audio-visual media, such as the car radio and YouTube videos.

Chapter 4 investigates the embodiment of church music both corporately and individually. Steuernagel wishes to provide “a brief account of Christian worship’s uneasiness with the worshipping body whilst offering a vocabulary to talk about the body from the perspective of performance” (98). He then highlights the use of instrumentation and the choice of arrangements, both of which set a tone for the congregation, and that these choices are very much a pastoral responsibility (122).

In chapter 5, the author examines music performance as the linchpin between three important elements: creating a special place for worship, setting aside a special time, and circumscribing a special group (158). He investigates how components such as lighting, congregational layout, sound, and gestures are used in the performance of church music, setting it apart as something special and creating diverse and distinctive worship environments. All these serve to blur the boundaries of traditional ritual performance, allowing room for church music to facilitate change.

In chapter 6, Steuernagel uses his new melded vocabulary to demonstrate how church music can be examined through the lens of performance (16). He states that when congregations engage with church music, they perform community and faith that is reverent, while also acknowledging that “tradition and change is a constant process in church music” (178).

Steuernagel closes the book with two appendices, one of which details his list of interviewees, while the other is a record of the questions he posed to these interviewees as part of his ethnographic research.

Through the use of a hybrid methodology including ethnography and theology, amongst others, *Church Music through the Lens of Performance*

examines relevant performance questions that occur on the platform and in the pew. Steuernagel provides valuable observations on the importance of actively participating in corporate worship, because when congregations make music together through liturgical ritual, they create something truly unique and greater than themselves and move away from the “messiness” in church music (189).

The topics Steuernagel investigates will continually be debated within the church and academic arena, so this is an excellent resource for worship leaders, church musicians, and anyone involved in music ministry. Students of worship and church music in the academy will enjoy his fresh perspective on “performance” along with his excellent resources for further reading.

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