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Review: Congregational Music-Making and Community in a Mediated Age

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Congregational Music-Making and Community in a Mediated Age, edited by Anna E. Nekola and Tom Wagner. Congregational Music Studies Series. London: Routledge, 2017. xiv + 263 pp. ISBN 978-1-4724-5919-0 (hardcover first published 2015 by Ashgate), ISBN 978-1-138-56901-0 (paperback).

In advertisements for Routledge's Congregational Music Studies Series, the editors make it clear that the series seeks to present theoretically and methodologically innovative studies of music making within contemporary Christianity that can further congregational music studies as a new academic field of study. The contributions in this volume certainly justify that aspiration. With a "media turn" in recent studies of religion,¹ especially through a surging interest in media-driven religious transformation, there have been significant monographs examining the impact of media practices on the sonic dimension of Islamic traditions.² The publication of an entire volume dedicated to exploring the relationship between media and sounded Christian practices is, therefore, timely.

Stressing the significance of conceptualizing congregational music as both media and mediation, the volume editors bring out their objective in the introduction: "This volume

presents congregational music as a site where music mediates our understandings of ourselves, the details of our belief, our experiences of salvation, our fellowship with others and our divine encounters" (p. 16). The introduction briefly discusses theories of media as both material and communicative culture (beyond a tool or technology), and proposes treating congregational music as lived religious experience (the active "doing" of congregational music), which lays a theoretical foundation for exploring the interplay of media, music, and religion. Following the introduction come twelve chapters grouped into three parts, each with a thematic focus of its own. The volume concludes with a thoughtful reflection essay by Monique Ingalls, one of the series editors, on the volume's contributions in general. Given the goal of examining congregational music making and media in different places and communities around the globe, the Euro-American focus of the volume comes as somewhat of a disappointment. The absence of the Asia-Pacific region (except in Chapter 1 and a brief reference in Chapter 6, p. 123) and ethnic minority communities (except in Chapter 8) are conspicuous. The addition of at least two cases from Asia, where global Pentecostalism and Evangelical Christianity are also present, would have improved the balance of topics for purposes of comparison.

The case studies in Part I, "Technology, Place, and Practice," present how new media engagements change religious practices in relation to worship space. Tom Wagner (Chapter 1) introduces the music of the Australia-based Hillsong Church within its transnational network of megachurches from the perspective of media ecology. Through examining Hillsong Church's annual Cross

¹ See Matthew Engelke, "Religion and the Media Turn: A Review Essay," *American Ethnologist* 37/2 (2010): 371–79.

² For example, Patrick Eisenlohr, *Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); and Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

Equals Love Easter media campaign, the author persuasively shows how formulaic business models in music production, distribution, and convergent marketing become inseparable from the making of meaningful and immediate religious experiences. Florian Carl (Chapter 2) explores the impact of social media on the Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic public sphere, with a particular concern about how it mediates secular dance styles in a religious context. To track how the sacred and secular intersect in believers' everyday lives, Carl notes that people use digital media technology to create more intimate ritual spaces in their own homes. Tanya Riches (Chapter 3), a Pentecostal worship leader, reflects on how social media influence communities' expectations of pastoral care, as indicated in the title "Panoptic or Pastoral Gaze" (p. 61). Riches draws attention to the advantages and challenges of the online environment for pastoral work. Her discussion of the rise of musicians as popular worship pastors with special status echoes scholarship on the media-induced transformation of Islamic authority. In Chapter 4, the last in Part I, Ruth K. Goddard attempts to explain the complex socio-cultural reasons for a general decline in congregational singing, which, the author insists, is caused by the dominant discourse of "a technologically driven fantasy sound ideal" (p. 88). Regrettably, the juxtaposition of analyses of congregational and generic singing makes her argument less compelling regarding the particular decline of church singing against the background of new media practices.

The next four essays in Part II, "Community Creation," address how concepts of community and forms of meaningful connection are expanded. Andrew Mall (Chapter 5) takes us to one of the most well

known Christian music festivals, Cornerstone, and demonstrates how it mediates an imagined subcultural community to sustain ideologies resistant to the mainstream. The juxtaposition of extended quotes from the author's fieldnotes with a few attendees' comments brings the festival experiences vibrantly to life, but the reader may want to hear more about what participants actually said in or about the festival. Next, Ellen Lueck (Chapter 6) details the international spread of the uniquely American Sacred Harp singing tradition. While highlighting the qualities of this community centering around the -symbolic *Sacred Harp* tunebook, Lueck points to the intersection of national and Sacred Harp identities across national borders. She persuasively argues that it has been the balance of mediated experiences and physical contact between singers that facilitates the successful expansion of the community. The joint article (Chapter 7) by Daniel Thornton and Mark Evans introduces approaches to online ethnography and shows how YouTube serves as a new mediator of virtual communities gathered around the appreciation of contemporary congregational songs. The authors highlight how YouTube's media structure enables users to participate in different levels of online engagement. Their analysis also echoes Riches's discussion in Chapter 3 about pastoral care—provided in their case by the channel owner as "the default moderator of any discussion on a YouTube video page" (p. 152). Riches's discussion, as well as that of Thornton and Evans, broadens an assessment of the ongoing domestication of new media practices in the deep-rooted religious paradigms such as pastoral care and Christian leadership. The next essay, by Kinga Povedák, also touches on the effects of YouTube on music-centered

religious community. In particular, Povedák investigates how intense media practices afford Romani Pentecostal Christians in Hungary the possibility of flexibly producing their own worship music consisting of both local ethnic and global styles in the making of a transnational Christian Romani community.

The four articles in the last section, “Embodied Sonic Theologies,” take the reader a step back to how new media practices complicate the meaningfulness of music itself as a distinctive medium and create dynamic intersections of music and theology from a variety of methodological perspectives other than ethnographical inquiry. In Chapter 9, through comparatively analyzing the musical details of recordings by two U.K.-based worship leaders, Allan F. Moore reflects on the “inherent contradiction” (p. 183) in worship music with regard to the persona of the worship leader in a congregational setting. Particularly notable is his proposal to distinguish “an *attitude* of worship” from “a *state* of worship,” which allows him to argue that the worship leader’s role in mediating between believers and God can be seen as “encouraging an effective *attitude* of worship” (p. 196; italics added). Also from a comparative perspective, Joshua Busman (Chapter 10) investigates how nuances in different renditions of the same Evangelical song, *God of This City*, can produce conflicting theological notions of prophecy, which highlights the effectiveness of media platforms in providing spaces for religious contestation through musical sound. The last two chapters concern the interplay of music, media, and affect. Clive Marsh (Chapter 11) broadens the concept of “salvation” to inform the dynamic process of being transformed by God in “affective space” (p. 226), which is mediated by music for believers to seek much

more than the feeling of “happiness.” Similarly focusing on the cultivation of sensational religious experiences through popular music, Marcus Moberg (Chapter 12) brings this “affective space” to life in a Finnish Lutheran context through examining how traditional church music is replaced by electronic dance music in the Dance + Pray worship format.

In sum, this volume is a valuable addition to the literature on media-driven religious transformation refracted through the field of congregational music making, not least because of the ethnographic richness and multidisciplinary voices it offers. Its main drawback is that it is weighted toward Christian musical genres in Pentecostal, charismatic, or Evangelical practices that share space with popular musical styles; a more specific book title would have better oriented the reader. Aside from that, for those interested in exploring some recent trends in studying sounded Christian practices, this is an inspirational read.

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