

MUSIC AND SPIRITUALITY

THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES, EMPIRICAL
METHODS, AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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13. Music in Christian Services as a Means to Induce Religious Feelings

Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann

For centuries, the relationship between music and spirituality has been considered, and even systematised, in religious community rituals. Music is used in the worshipping practices of most religions. Its functions are manifold, but always include establishing a connection to the divine. It has long been assumed that listening to or making music facilitates access to spiritual realities and the divine—to discover, explore or experience them, to learn about them and to communicate with them. In this chapter, I will approach this relationship from the combined perspectives of the history of liturgical and sacred music in the Christian Churches of Western Europe, theoretical and empirical studies of post-conciliar practices of liturgical music in the Roman Catholic Church, and a conceptual framework called ‘aesthetics of the liturgy’,¹ drawing also from research of audiences’ live music experiences in real-world contexts. My personal background as a practising Roman Catholic may also come into play. First, a three-fold taxonomy of the psychological effects of music in Christian worship (‘social’, ‘spiritual’, and ‘dispositional’) will be introduced, followed by a review of the existing empirical studies of such effects. Second, some of the key findings of a quantitative study on

1 See Klaus Peter Dannecker and Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann, ‘Wirkungsästhetik: Ein neuer Ansatz für eine transdisziplinäre empirische Liturgieforschung’, *Liturgisches Jahrbuch. Vierteljahreshefte für Fragen des Gottesdienstes* 68.2 (2018), 83–108.

the spiritual and social effects of singing in Catholic worship in German-speaking countries will be summarised. Third, I propose a new research programme to understand empirically the spiritual and dispositional effects of different kinds of ‘musicking’ in Christian worship.

I. Measuring the Psychological Effects of Music in Christian Services

In the Christian context, inducing or increasing religious feelings—such as devotion, love of God, feeling close to God, gratefulness, contrition, or repentance—is one type of function or effect music is expected to have across most denominations.² A reading of the present authoritative Roman Catholic documents on music in the liturgy allows us to extract a broad range of functions ascribed to music, and in particular singing. These documents include the conciliar constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC, 1963),³ the related instruction *Musicam Sacram* (MS, 1967),⁴ as well as the preface to the reformed Roman missal, *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani* (IGMR, 1975, 2002).⁵ Alongside the pragmatic, semiotic, and decorative functions of singing and music, three types of psychological effects can be identified, which I have previously labelled ‘spiritual effects’, ‘social effects’, and ‘dispositional effects’.⁶

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- 2 See, for example, William T. Flynn, ‘Liturgical Music’, in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. by Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 769–92.
 - 3 ‘Sacrosanctum Concilium’, *Vatican.va*, 4 December 1963, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html (henceforth SC).
 - 4 ‘Musicam Sacram: Instruction on Music in the Liturgy’, *Vatican.va*, 5 March 1967, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_instr_19670305_musicam-sacram_en.html (henceforth MS).
 - 5 ‘Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani’, *Vatican.va*, 13 November 2002, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20030317_ordinamento-messale_en.html (henceforth IGMR). For a detailed analysis of the IGMR, see Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann, ‘Liturgische Aufführungsbestimmungen zwischen Semiotik und Ästhetik: Ein Durchgang durch die “Allgemeine Einführung in das Römische Meßbuch”’, in *Wirkungsästhetik der Liturgie: Transdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, ed. by Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann et al. (Regensburg: Pustet, 2020), pp. 143–64.
 - 6 Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann, ‘Positive Aspekte des gemeinschaftlichen Singens: Ein Forschungsüberblick’, in *Wirkungsästhetik der Liturgie*, ed. Wald-Fuhrmann et al., pp. 191–214. For an abridged English version, on which I also draw in this chapter,

Spiritual effects of singing include phrases like ‘the sanctification of the faithful’,⁷ ‘the raising of the minds of the congregation to heavenly things or to God’,⁸ and ‘the embellishment of prayer’.⁹ Social effects are addressed when it comes to ‘promoting unanimity’ and the connectedness of the congregants through singing.¹⁰ Dispositional effects consist mainly of persuasion and emotional contagion through music and are connected to the church’s belief that song or music has an enhancing effect on the words it accompanies, which also seems to be the primary justification for the ‘pre-eminence’ that is given to music over any other art in Catholic worship.¹¹ Concretely, the musical embedding of liturgical texts is supposed to direct the attention of the congregation to the words they sing and, in this way, to help the words penetrate the congregants’ minds and souls. Thus, for example, attendants of Mass may make the meaning of the texts and their emotional tone their own in order to become the ‘I’ or ‘We’ that speaks in the chant.¹² While social and spiritual effects of singing and listening to music in Christian services have been extensively discussed in theological, liturgical, and music historical scholarship,¹³ this dispositional function has often been overlooked. Furthermore, empirical studies that seek to explore the

see Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann, Sven Boenneke, Thijs Vroegh, and Klaus Peter Dannecker, “‘He Who Sings, Prays Twice’? Singing in Roman Catholic Mass Leads to Spiritual and Social Experiences that are Predicted by Religious and Musical Attitudes’, *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, 570189 (2020), 1–3.

7 MS, art. 5.

8 MS, art. 5 and 15.

9 SC, art. 112; MS, art. 5.

10 SC, art. 112; MS, art. 5.

11 SC, art. 112.

12 IGMR, art. 52 and 62. The arousal of spiritual and dispositional effects also serves as a key argument in theological discussions of sacred music more broadly, and additionally outside the liturgy, e.g., in the context of oratorios as a musical means for conversion. See Esma Cerkovnik, ‘...*Et nos immutabimur*—Music and Conversion in Rome in the First Half of the 17th Century (Kassel: Merseburger, 2020).

13 See, for example, Jan Michael Joncas, *From Sacred Song to Ritual Music: Twentieth-Century Understandings of Roman Catholic Worship Music* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997); Christopher Page, *The Christian West and Its Singers: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Philipp Harnoncourt, ‘Gesang und Musik im Gottesdienst’, in *Die Messe: Ein Kirchenmusikalisches Handbuch*, ed. by Harold Schützeichel (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1991), pp. 9–25; Mary E. McGann, ‘Interpreting the Ritual Role of Music in Christian Liturgical Practice’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, 1996); Luigi Girardi, ed., *Liturgia e emozione* (Rome: Studi di Liturgia, 2015).

occurrence, extent, and conditions under which these effects occur in the present day are extremely rare.

Existing empirical studies on experiences and psychological effects of (group) singing and music listening that are relevant to the present topic can be sorted into three main groups: (1) religious (Christian) singing experience; (2) non-religious group singing; and (3) music listening.

Thus far, for Christian singing experiences, only qualitative studies exist. These studies provide rich and detailed descriptions of subjective singing experiences in various religious and musical contexts, and they seem to support the assumptions of Roman Catholic liturgical doctrine alluded to above.¹⁴ There appears to be only one study that quantitatively examined spiritual singing experiences in the context of a specific Christian denomination.¹⁵ The second group is formed by more psychologically and quantitatively oriented studies that mainly investigate group singing in amateur choir singers (outside religious services).¹⁶ These studies have generated initial evidence for a broad

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- 14 For studies in Protestant denominations, see Rebecca J. Slough, "‘Let Every Tongue, by Art Refined, Mingle Its Softest Notes with Mine’: An Exploration of Hymn-Singing Events and Dimensions of Knowing", in *Religious and Social Ritual. Interdisciplinary Explorations*, ed. by Michael B. Aune and Valerie DeMarinis (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 175–206; Ellen S. Davis, "The Multi-Faceted Phenomenon of Congregational Song: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of Interpretive Influences" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA 1997); Marlene Kropf and Kenneth James Nafziger, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2011); Gordan Alban Adnams, "The Experience of Congregational Singing: An Ethno-Phenomenological Approach" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Concordia University of Edmonton, Alberta, 2008); Hanns Kerner, *Die Kirchenmusik: Wahrnehmungen aus zwei neuen empirischen Untersuchungen unter evangelisch Getauften in Bayern* (Nürnberg: Gottesdienst-Institut der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Bayern, 2008); Jochen Kaiser, *Singen in Gemeinschaft als ästhetische Kommunikation: Eine ethnographische Studie* (Berlin: Springer, 2017); McGann, "Interpreting the Ritual Role of Music"; Kit Smith, "The Singing Assembly: How Does Music Affect the Faith Life of a Worshipping Community?", *The Australasian Catholic Record* 87.3 (2010), 284–95.
- 15 Mandi M. Miller and Kenneth T. Strongman, "The Emotional Effects of Music on Religious Experience: A Study of the Pentecostal-Charismatic Style of Music and Worship", *Psychology of Music* 30.1 (2002), 8–27.
- 16 The existing body of studies has been summarised and evaluated in several review articles. See, for example, Stephen Clift et al., "Group Singing, Wellbeing and Health: A Systematic Mapping of Research Evidence", *Unesco Observatory* 2.1 (2010), 1–25; Imogen N. Clarke and Katherine Harding, "Psychosocial Outcomes of Active Singing Interventions for Therapeutic Purposes: A Systematic Review

range of benefits for physical, mental, and social well-being for various communities. Social effects such as facilitating social bonding, and creating feelings of social connectedness or social participation, seem to be a particularly frequent and strong outcome of group singing.¹⁷ Although there is a large body of quantitative psychological research on experiences during music listening, spiritual dimensions are only very rarely covered in this context.

However, no quantitative studies seem to exist so far that address dispositional effects of religious singing. And there is only a very small number of studies that touch upon related questions such as how the musical and textual elements of songs interact with each other regarding emotional and motivational effects. There is, however, a large and supposedly relevant research tradition dealing with the emotional effects of music listening.¹⁸

II. An Empirical Study of the Spiritual and Social Effects of Group Singing in Catholic Worship

To follow up on our theoretical analysis of liturgical documents and our review of existing research on the topic of psychological effects of group singing (in Christian services), Klaus Peter Dannecker, Sven Boenneke, and I conducted a survey on singing experiences in Mass as a first quantitative approach to the issue in question.¹⁹ For this purpose,

of the Literature', *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* 21.1 (2012), 80–98; Jing Kang et al., 'Review of the Physiological Effects and Mechanisms of Singing', *Journal of Voice* 32.4 (2017), 390–95; and Antje Bullack et al., 'Psychobiological Effects of Choral Singing on Affective State, Social Connectedness, and Stress: Influences of Singing Activity and Time Course', *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 12 (2018), 223.

- 17 Gunter Kreutz, 'Does Singing Facilitate Social Bonding?', *Music and Medicine* 6.2 (2014), 51–60; Elluned Pearce et al., 'The Ice-Breaker Effect: Singing Mediates Fast Social Bonding', *Royal Society Open Science* 2.10 (2015), 150221; Bullack et al., 'Psychobiological Effects'; Genevieve A. Dingle et al., 'An Agenda for Best Practice Research on Group Singing, Health, and Well-Being', *Music and Science* 2 (2019), 1–15.
- 18 A widely-cited model on the different mechanisms underlying emotion induction through music listening can be found in Patrick N. Juslin, 'From Everyday Emotions to Aesthetic Emotions: Towards a Unified Theory of Musical Emotions', *Physics of Life Review* 10.3 (2013), 235–66.
- 19 Wald-Fuhrmann et al., "'He Who Sings, Prays Twice?'"

we transformed the identified functions attributed to songs and singing in Catholic worship into three hypotheses, namely: (1) liturgical singing facilitates feeling connected to God; (2) it induces the feeling of social connectedness among congregants; and (3) singing religious texts is experienced as a form of personal prayer. We collected data from more than 1600 Catholics from German-speaking countries who completed an exhaustive questionnaire. The questionnaire's central part consisted of questions on whether and how often churchgoers actually experience the three types of effects when singing in Mass. For this purpose, we transformed each of the aforementioned hypotheses into several statements and asked the participants how often they have such experiences in church. In addition, participants answered a number of socio-demographic questions, but also questions regarding their religious and musical background, practices, and attitudes.

Overall, our participants reported having these experiences relatively frequently (mean values for all relevant items ranged from 3.5 to 4.4 on a 5-point scale with 1 = never and 5 = very often). Social feelings seemed to be experienced even more frequently than spiritual feelings and feelings of singing as praying. In a next step, we explored potential statistical relationships between the frequency of such singing experiences and a person's socio-demographic, religious, and musical background with the help of linear regression models. Significantly, while socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, or level of education were not related to singing experiences, religious, and musical practices were so related, and attitudes even more strongly so. Concretely, the frequency of spiritual experiences during singing in Mass was statistically related to a traditional understanding of the Mass, a positive attitude towards singing in Mass, and a personal practice of singing at home; together, these three factors explained 33% of the variance of our data. The feeling of singing as praying (i.e., a dispositional effect) was also related to a traditional understanding of Mass and a positive attitude towards singing in Mass, as well as—albeit to a weaker degree—having a musical office in Mass and a positive attitude towards one's own singing; here, 34% of the variance was explained by these factors. Social experience, on the other hand, could be less well explained (the final statistical model captured only 22% of the variance in the data), but was found to be

related to a more secular understanding of Mass and a social motivation to attend Mass.

This survey appears to demonstrate that three core functions attributed to singing in Catholic worship—liturgical singing facilitates feeling connected to God, it induces the feeling of social connectedness, and it is experienced as a form of personal prayer—do generally hold true in practice, at least with respect to the population we studied. However, there are limitations to this survey and analysis which require further investigation. It may be misleading to take the high frequencies of such experiences at face value. As participation in the survey was voluntary, it may have been driven, at least in part, by prior interest in the topic of singing at Mass, and a generally positive attitude towards it. Further, the results show that the frequency of the experiences of interest depends to a significant degree on religious and musical attitudes. This highlights at least two things. First, the presence of music and singing does not automatically and uniformly lead to the expected effects (as the Church documents seem to assume, as they adopt a more ‘pharmaceutical’ understanding of musical effects on worship). Second, in addition to attitudes, the occurrence of such singing experience may also depend on the concrete forms of musical integration into a religious service, i.e., their actual aesthetic realisation. Yet, the influence of these factors could not be established by this survey, since questions had to be answered retrospectively, averaging across many services, and not related to a particular one. Acknowledging the limitations of this, and other existing studies, enables us to develop a revised understanding of the underlying research questions, and a revised formulation of an empirical approach to them, as will be discussed in the following section.

III. ‘Musicking’, and the Type, Intensity, and Likelihood of Spiritual Experiences in Christian Worship

So far, this chapter has mainly dealt with the theory and experience of active singing in Mass. However, there are many forms of music and musicking present at Christian services both within and across denominations, including, for example, (1) singing by individuals that

perform a liturgical office; (2) singing by the whole congregation; and (3) instrumental music that the congregation listens to. There are also many other relevant distinctions, as between (1) forms of liturgical music that constitute liturgical acts of their own (like sung prayers or the chants of the ordinary) and (2) forms that accompany a liturgical act; and as between (3) communal chants and hymns that occur regularly in worship services, and (4) complex musical compositions performed by specialised ensembles.

Taken together, the question arises whether all these different forms of liturgical music have the same relation to the religious feelings they aim to arouse, or whether the type, intensity, and likelihood of such feelings vary depending on the type of music present in a service. For example, it might well be the case that listening to others singing a chant or song affords a weaker spiritual experience than when singing it oneself. And listening to or singing a well-known chant or song might provoke religious feelings more easily than an unfamiliar tune. Also, the basic assumption that a sung prayer is more emotionally effective than a spoken one has never been studied systematically. Therefore, one may think of a research design that combines theoretical, historical, and comparative approaches with an experimental research paradigm to study how concrete forms of music and musicking interact with religious feelings in Christian services (of one or more denominations).

The primary focus would be on spiritual and dispositional effects of music, but other types of religious feelings might also be found that are associated with sacred music. Among others, the influence of the following factors could be examined experimentally: (1) recitation versus singing; (2) singing versus listening; (3) familiar versus unfamiliar repertoires; and (4) spiritual intention versus internal intention. Possible digressions may touch upon the musical styles that are felt by people to be most associated with spirituality (e.g., gospel singing versus more traditional church songs), or the question of whether historical genres of liturgical music (such as motets, cantatas, or mass compositions) can still work in the context of religious services today or whether, instead, they create a sphere of spirituality in a context outside of religious services, such as in a concert performance.

In relation to these factors of influence, we may put forward the following provisional hypotheses. First, a sung prayer is more spiritually

effective than a spoken one. This experimental hypothesis, founded on a common assumption ('he who sings prays twice'), has never been studied systematically in an empirical experiment. Second, singing a chant or hymn affords a stronger spiritual experience than when listening to others doing the same. It is of critical importance to test this widely held hypothesis empirically, not least due to the culture wars in Christian worship with regard to 'active participation' (i.e., to what extent active participation includes listening to music as well as singing or performing music). Third, listening to or singing a familiar chant or song provokes a more intense spiritual experience than listening to or singing an unfamiliar tune. The question of which repertoires to use during a service is also highly debated among church musicians and churchgoers. Based on large empirical evidence for the importance of familiarity in aesthetic contexts, we assume that familiarity will play a particularly important role with regard to the dispositional effect. Fourth, the presence of a repertoire that is commonly associated with the spiritual and religious sphere (e.g., Gregorian chant, Renaissance polyphony, gospel songs) will evoke spiritual experiences more strongly than other musical repertoires and styles. For the longest part in their history, church authorities in all Christian denominations have sought to control which musical styles and repertoires were allowed a role in public worship. Often, the reasons for this implied a belief in the spiritual qualities of certain stylistic properties. While this may not hold true, it can be assumed that the association of certain styles with the spiritual will act as a psychological top-down mechanism and thus afford a spiritual experience. Fifth, if a singer's intention is directed externally to the spiritual content of the music sung, the music will provoke a more intense spiritual experience in the listener than if the singer's intention is directed internally (focused exclusively on the voice, pitch, etc.). Other hypotheses could also be developed in relation to the factors of influence mentioned above and to further factors of influence explored.

While some of the relevant issues could be studied in a controlled laboratory environment, most of them would be addressed most effectively in ecologically valid contexts, i.e., during real religious services. Individual factors (such as an individual's musicality, musical attitudes, and religious background) will need to be controlled, as they are likely to moderate music effects. In such experiments, the factors

of interest will be used to manipulate the experimental stimuli, which will be specific Christian services. For example, to study the effects of recitation versus singing, the same Christian service could be performed in two different ways: one, where all texts and prayers are recited, and the other, where those texts and prayers that can be sung are sung. To study the effects of familiarity and religious association, sung services could either feature only Gregorian chants or only modern pop-style songs.

To chart differences in the type or degree of spiritual experiences, one could adopt experimental approaches from studies of concert audiences. Here, three types of data have been collected that yielded meaningful results:²⁰ first, continuous psycho-physiological measures such as heart and breathing activity, as well as electrodermal activity. All of these are known to be related to the autonomous nervous system and to emotional experiences. It will be of interest to investigate event-related, i.e., momentary responses of individual study participants over the course of a service, but also to look for the degree of physiological synchronisation across participants. The second type of data is yielded from peak experience monitoring. One way to achieve this is to request participants to press a button sensor at moments of particular spiritual or affective experience during a worship service. After the service, the research team may refer the participant to these recorded moments in the service and ask them to describe the nature of the experience. The third type of data is qualitative and quantitative self-reported data, with participants filling in questionnaires about their experience immediately after the worship service. Study participants would ideally consist of congregations (ordinary participants of a service without a liturgical office) and liturgical singers (people who sing as part of their liturgical or religious office).

20 Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann et al., 'Music Listening in Classical Concerts: Theory, Literature Review, and Research Program', *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, 638783 (2021); Julia Merrill et al., 'The Aesthetic Experience of Live Concerts: Self-Reports and Psychophysiology', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 17.2 (2021), 134–51; Anna Czepiel et al., 'Synchrony in the Periphery: Inter-Subject Correlation of Physiological Responses during Live Music Concerts', *Scientific Reports* 11.1 (2021), 1–16; Wolfgang Tschacher et al., 'Audience Synchronies in Live Concerts Illustrate the Embodiment of Music Experience', *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023), 14843.

Whatever the results of an experiment such as this, it will be important to consider, also, if they are specific to Christian contexts or if they may extend to other religions and their musico-religious practices. As empirical research of the purported psychological effects (and especially the spiritual and dispositional effects) of music in worship is very much in its infancy (with, as we have seen, few studies currently available), there is much scope for further empirical projects of the kind described and proposed in this chapter. Only when there is a greater breadth and depth of empirical studies can more reliable inferences be drawn both within particular religious communities, and across them.

