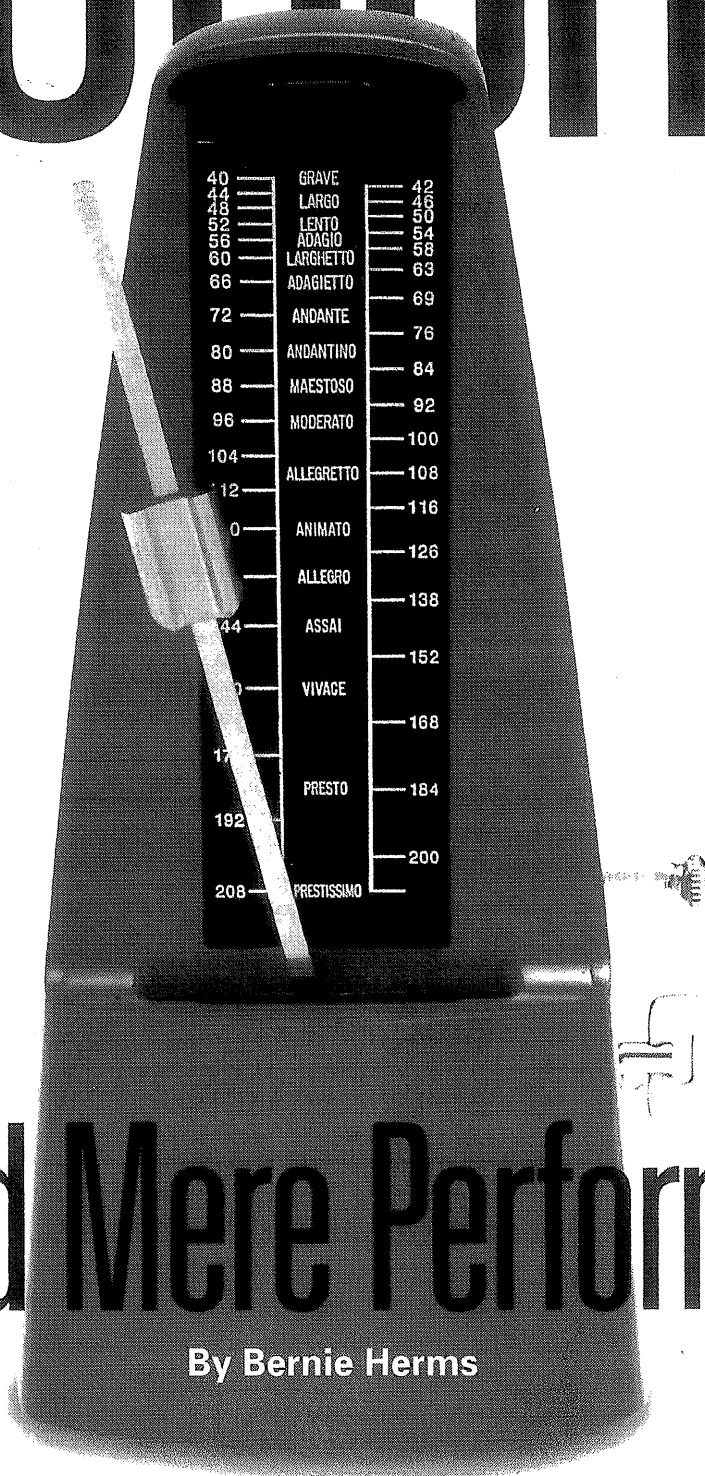


WORSHIP



Beyond Mere Performance

By Bernie Herms

Worship.

What a word. So ripe with meaning, yet so riddled with connotation. Central to our relationship with God, yet mired in the contradictions of a church consumer culture. Worship is the buzzword of every church growth 101 handbook and the most popular marketing handle for the labeling of commercial church music. At the same time, however, it is also the singular reason you and I are on this planet in the first place. While the Word of God teaches us the holistic view of life lived as a sacrifice of worship, it is thunderously silent on the form, musical style and cultural conventions our corporate worship music in church services should have. Aside from the more vague descriptions of "hymns, spiritual songs and crashing cymbals" in the musical aspects of worship, we always find ourselves at the intersection of human performance and the Holy Spirit.

I can hear the protests already: "performance you say? No son, here we worship in the power of the Spirit, we don't perform!" Such were the words of a youth pastor of mine, burned into my memory as a young boy at an important spiritual and artistic crossroad. The wonder and fascination that the great classical composers held over me, even from earliest memory of five and six years old, was gruffly juxtaposed by what I experienced in church. The tension, confusion, even physical pain I felt at the horrific intonation of the orchestra, a piano left untuned for years and a general ethic of blissfully under-rehearsed volunteerism led a young church kid down a road to a fractured view of the performance of worship.

LIFT THE BAN

The word performance itself, in the context of a musical worship service, has often assumed almost a taboo status and held an unnatural negativity—meaning human effort, entertainment, or the flesh in motion. It has been awkwardly pitted against all things of the Spirit. The secular vs. the sacred, the technically superior vs. the anointed, the studied vs. the spirit-led; the more time you've spent around church

music, the more familiar these false dichotomies sound. Of course, plenty of examples of the opposite extreme also abound in which artistry is exalted to its own place of worship—our fallen nature is ever susceptible to subverting God's glory. Just ask anyone on Sunday morning about their worship experience after the guitarist took over the service in a blaze of free-form Jazz-guitar-solo glory. In fact, the tendencies of our flesh are at times used as the basis of objection to an ethic/theology of musical excellence in our worship. Often, in our desire for a pure worship experience devoid of anything unspiritual, one blatantly obvious reality is obscured: a performance of some kind must take place. In order for anything musical to occur at all in a worship service, a hand must be lifted, a mind engaged, and we then proceed to ply the craft we have taken years to perfect. We are, in fact, performing regardless of our motives, understanding of anointing or our philosophical objections.

Mere semantics? Hardly, when you consider that how we think about something informs every action toward it. Take theology for example. Our concept of God informs every aspect of our relationship with Him, our very life. So, if we are indeed performing, then for Whom? Is the audience your god or is God your audience? If God is your audience, it changes everything. I'm not saying that God is the only audience but rather the ultimate One—the One who has invited us to worship. As we worship God, our ability to also lead a congregation in the same is transformed into a sacred performance putting all other functions of worship, such as spiritual warfare and corporate edification, in their rightful place. In this light, we musicians, writers, leaders, singers, conductors—indeed, all musical worshipers—are engaged in the ultimate performance art. Your performance isn't at odds with a pure worship; it is your worship.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

I remember an epiphany I had about musicianship while attending university. While I was studying both classical composition and commercial recording arts, the university organized a panel of industry pros to lecture on commercial session work. One panel guest, quite unassumingly submitted a three-word phrase that, while disarmingly

simple, hit me like a ton of bricks. "Know your audience," he said. While he was referring to the subtleties in choice of keyboard style one employs with certain producers for certain genres, isn't this really at the heart of our worship performance? If God is the audience, what, then, is good enough for Him? Just how masterful should a performance be for the Creator of the universe? Will a quickie 30 minute run through of the choir songs on Thursday night cut it when the King of Kings shows up? How does our craft stack up to what the world offers its idols, gods and VIPs? Is this all just idealistic, pretentious and subjective reflection, or can a practical reality be extracted that leads us from a practical theology to the practice of excellence in the service of worship?

There are two arenas in which this can live or die: In the community of church leadership and in the hearts and minds of individual musician worshipers.

MORE THAN MERE PERFORMANCE

In the global church at large, our worship should actually be a wonder to the world by all artistic standards, yet intrinsically and divinely set apart from mere entertainment or artistic indulgence. I'm not suggesting that believers are any more or less talented than un-believers. Any honest afternoon with a Mahler Symphony, Beatles anthology or Stevie Wonder record will debunk that myth in a hurry. God's gifts are irrevocable whether or not we acknowledge Him. But only when church leaders nurture an environment and worldview that makes our musical offerings an urgent matter of corporate devotion can the church assume its rightful function in worship. Music programs will be healthier when neither the extreme of slick professionalism nor unqualified but faithful volunteerism is exalted one above the other, but where a fusion of skilled, masterful, costly, sacrificial musicianship bathed in the Holy Spirit is the only thing considered good enough for our "Audience." I know, we're aiming pretty high here aren't we? Of course, it would be idealistic and fruitless to assume the massive array of local churches and denominational cultures wouldn't also produce a huge spectrum in degree of quality given their individual resources. But whether paid professional church musician or volunteer, once God has your best, I mean your very

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best, the miracle of personal and corporate transformation is scripturally, inevitable.

ZEALOUS EXCELLENCE

So then, what does God, our audience, deserve or require of us musicians individually? Okay, I admit it; this is a tricky one. Aside from a few exhortations in the Psalms to "play skillfully" or as in Psalm 150:2, "according to his excellent greatness" (NKJV), the Bible isn't going to tell you how to be a better musician any more than it's going to tell you which

college to attend. Quite simply, you are called to be your best. That might be very different than someone else's best. But notice an important distinction between service and calling. While I don't intend to denigrate faithful service, a calling commands even more: A passionate lifestyle of devotion to your craft. As much as I love Rachmaninoff's compositional voice, Billy Preston's funk-a-liscious piano grooves or Nichole Nordeman's mastery of the lyric craft, I know I may never attain those levels of artistic brilliance. That's not to say, however, that the

better part of my 34 years haven't been spent saturating myself with all kinds of musical influences and relentless practice in the quest to become whatever God had planned for my unique giftings.

In modern church worship music, guitar players need to constantly compare their guitar tones and playing craft to the greats like David Gilmour, Paul Jackson, Jr., or U2's The Edge. Drummers should continually work with click tracks and study how greats like Abe Laboriel, Jr., Matt Chamberlain and Scott Williamson incorporate stylized grooves into commercial song structures. Keyboardists, you need to know the work of David Foster, Richard Smallwood and Michalek Omartian and constantly practice how this can impact your worship playing. Choir leaders, make yourselves aware of the amazing range of the great sacred choral arrangers—from Robert Shaw to Geron Davis. We could go on to each instrument group or each musical genre and say infinitely more because a dialogue of this scope really encompasses a lifetime of learning.

Whether professional or volunteer, your calling demands a sacrifice of time and passion. When your craft is but a mere shadow of what it could be, what does it say to the Giver of the gift? Maybe the demands of life have long extinguished your creative drive and reduced your craft to faithful but stagnant service. But whatever God has called you to, He's already equipped you for. Although God created music, I can't really speak to whether or not God cringes when the tenors in the choir decide to spontaneously rewrite the arrangement with a dash of polytonality. But the Word does teach us that while man looks on the outside, God judges the heart. Is your heart set on pleasing an audience of One? When our audience and judge is God, it compels us to live a life devoted to excellence, taking us beyond mere performance and into pure worship. WJ

The top five myths of the worship service:

1. You must not perform. Otherwise it's a concert. Technically a worship team performs every time they play for people. The way that you perform will elicit a response from those watching. You are also performing for God. How excellent would you strive to be if you were performing for the President of the United States? God deserves much more than any human figure.

2. The overall worship experience of the leader is the same as the people in the congregation. One of the ways that a worship leader should be worshipping God is by being a skilled leader. It is similar to the idea that the host of a party has a different experience from someone attending. Always be aware of your guests' needs, and the experience they are having in the worship journey.

3. Church is not entertainment. To entertain is to hold the attention of someone. Church is certainly more than mere entertainment, but any person trying to get any other person's attention must entertain. God added music to delight, which is in effect the biblical equivalent to entertainment.

4. Any noise is a joyful noise. From the stage, this can be a distraction. Anything that draws attention away from God can become an idol. This doesn't mean that God will smite us if we hit a wrong note, but we should rehearse and strive to become as transparent as possible from the platform.

5. Sound check is a rehearsal. The sound check is not where you decide the songs or choose to rehearse them. It is a time to check the sound that you have already rehearsed. The proper use of a sound check makes the term "sound check" make much more sense.

Apply It

- Before your next rehearsal, tell your team that you are expecting a special guest for the upcoming Sunday. Someone who you can't believe has found the time to spend at church this Sunday and has chosen to spend it with you. Do a devotion with your team on who the audience is for their worship.
- Spend time this week practicing yourself.
- Get your rehearsal done before your sound check this week.



Bernie Herms earned his B.A. in Classical Composition from Belmont University in Nashville, TN. Raised in a pastor's home in Canada, Bernie has much experience in church ministry. He is

a Dove-nominated and critically acclaimed music producer and songwriter who has worked with such artists as Casting Crowns, CeCe Winans, Brad Paisley, Avalon, Natalie Grant and Steven Curtis Chapman. He and his wife, Natalie, reside in Nashville, TN.