

# Church Music Madness: Too Dull or Too Live?

**“Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals” (Psalm 150:3-5, NIV).**

Social media spun into a tizzy following a posted video showing a youth praise team in church performing a routine to Jay-Z’s The Story of O.J. The song included repeated use of the “N” word, with expected curse words sprinkled throughout.

Responding to the groundswell of treasonous-like cries from the Christian community, the minister of music posted a response explaining the video’s missing context.

“This [routine and song] was intentionally set up as a sermon presentation for the pastor’s out-of-the-box message” he said. He also noted that the routine ended with the gospel song, Break Every Chain by Tasha Cobb (which was not heard on the viral video), and that the members were prepared for the unusual display.

This portrays a new tug-of-war—what type of music is appropriate to use in church; which joins the old tug-of-war—what’s appropriate music for Christians, period?

On one side are the folks who point to Bible verses that name specific styles (psalms, hymns, spiritual songs) and instruments (lyre, harp, cymbals) as the basis for how to determine what God views as proper music. On the other side are the folks who believe that contemporary times justify contemporary styles in order to keep church youth, and get the “un-churched,” interested in the gospel.



*Jason Max Ferdinand,  
"Choir of the World"  
director puts sanity back  
in the service. Music  
should enhance worship  
rather than dominate it.*

"As life progresses, generations get stuck in memory," says Dr. Jason Max Ferdinand when thinking about the back-and-forth clashing of opinions. "It becomes more about what we're used to and comfortable with, rather than what is now or what will be."

Ferdinand is an academically trained and accomplished musician. He won the 2017 "Outstanding Director of the World" title at last summer's Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod in Wales, for his work leading the Aeolians of Oakwood University (who, by the way, won the title, "Choir of the World" at the same competition). He also serves as the chairperson of the music department at Oakwood University, and minister of music for the Oakwood University Church. Yet he's only thirty-something, which puts him in the gap between Christian old guards and upstarts.

Along with each side needing to take the time to understand the other, Ferdinand suggests other tactics to use when choosing music to listen to, and use in church:

**Don't misuse the Bible.** Don't use the types of songs and instruments that the Bible specifically names to judge what it doesn't name. Music styles and instruments that we know about now (negro spirituals, drums) weren't known by the Bible writers at that time. "The Bible doesn't prescribe that this is good and this is bad," Ferdinand posits. "We need to be very careful about using the Bible as a whipping tool for what we shouldn't do, instead of using the broad principles that are spoken of to guide what we should do."



*“If I’m writing and doing music celebrating the Creator, who is the most creative being in the world...why should I be limited in expressing myself? He’s creative, so why shouldn’t my music be creative too?” – Kirk Franklin (The New Yorker).*

**Be excellent in diversity.** Whether one is performing a song by Handel or Kirk Franklin, it needs to be done well. A knowledge and understanding of a song’s historical background and context helps musicians interpret the song in ways that align with the composer’s intent. When coupled with trained, skillful use of instruments – both vocal and non – the result is a beautifully rendered piece that helps all age groups grow in diverse music styles.

**Restore originality.** Many times churches use songs for praise and worship simply because they’re popular, rather than because they actually fit the worship element they support. This can result in feelings of “randomness” about how songs are chosen and used. Instead, Ferdinand would like to see more emphasis on creating original music, rather than just copying music. “For example,” he says, “If I were to tell 30 [local musicians] to write a song about prayer from which we choose the best five, now we have all this new music that specifically matches the worship element.”

**Use music with intention.** Music should enhance worship rather than dominate it. To achieve this, music should be chosen intentionally for its content and context. “I worked in a Baptist church for five years under the mentorship of Nolan Williams,” reflects Ferdinand. “We actually had musical formulas for how, when, and what to incorporate into the worship service, including when to be silent.”

While Ferdinand acknowledged that complete use of these principles might be hard for untrained music leaders and listeners, he believes that trained musicians can serve as “point people” to influence and set direction.

“A friend of mine sent me a video clip of a young man in Africa who, though untrained in music, was leading a choir rehearsal,” Ferdinand recalls. “This choir sounded amazing! When asked about his musical influences, the young man said he just copies everything that the Aeolians do.” That let Ferdinand know just how far and wide influence can go in stabilizing the views and use of music in churches everywhere.

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