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Cover Page Footnote

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Sounding the Congregational Voice

Marissa Glynias Moore

Why are fewer people singing in church? This is a question that currently preoccupies mainline Protestant and Catholic clergy, church musicians, and laity in the United States.¹ Through online listicles with titles like “Nine Reasons Why People Aren’t Singing in Worship,” “Six Reasons Congregational Singing Is Waning,” or “7 Reasons People May Not Sing in Church,” writers attempt to diagnose the budding crisis in a variety of ways:² maybe the musical style is to blame, because it is either too syncopated for congregations to replicate communally (a common criticism raised against Contemporary Worship Music, or CWM) or too stylistically removed from what congregations listen to in their daily lives (a critique of “traditional” Protestant hymnody). Perhaps the issue is purely one of vocal range, as many selections

are pitched too high for congregants to sing. Or maybe, as hymnologist John Bell has argued, the blame rests with the musical celebrity culture of the West, which disenfranchises individuals of their own voices by overly privileging vocal “talent.”³ Indeed, at a time when Evangelical megachurches are thriving around the globe with a seemingly high level of participatory musicking, this question becomes even more urgent for local American congregations to grapple with.⁴

The fears being voiced in the contemporary mainline Protestant blogosphere are only the most recent manifestation of similar concerns that have resounded throughout the history of Christianity. From the Reformation to the Second Vatican Council to the American “worship wars” of recent decades over the appropriateness of popular music in church, Christian institutions have implemented reforms targeting a perceived lack of congregational participation within worship. Because of congregational singing’s ubiquity across most denominational liturgies, it is often prioritized as a privileged site for these reforms, since it is a practice that depends on the active vocal participation of the gathered body of worshippers. Currently, solutions to the lack of congregational singing proceed even outside of prescriptive institutional change, as evidenced

¹ Thomas Day, *Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism* (Spring Valley, NY: Cross-road, 2013); Ruth King Goddard, “Who Gets to Sing in the Kingdom?,” in *Congregational Music-Making and Community in a Mediated Age*, ed. Anna E. Nekola and Tom Wagner (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015). For more on the “mainline” and its current worship practice, see Jason Lantzer, *Mainline Christianity* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

² Kenny Lamm, “Nine Reasons People Aren’t Singing in Worship,” <https://www.renewingworshipnc.org/2014/06/11/nine-reasons-people-arent-singing-in-worship/>; Brian Moss, “7 Reasons People May Not Sing in Church,” <http://www.pastorbrianmoss.com/7-reasons-people-may-not-sing-in-church/>; Thom S. Rainer, “Six Reasons Congregational Singing Is Waning,” <http://thomrainer.com/2016/10/six-reasons-congregational-singing-waning/>. This is just a brief selection of many articles of this type. Reasons also include arguments over liturgy and reduction of the congregation’s role purely to singing; for example, see Jonathan Aigner, “Why Would Anyone Sing in Church These Days?,” <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ponderanew/2016/06/06/why-would-anyone-sing-in-church-these-days/>.

³ John L. Bell, *The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Song* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000), 95–113.

⁴ As just one of many examples, see the recently published volume on the globalization and worship practice of Hillsong Church: Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner, eds., *The Hillsong Movement Examined: You Call Me out Upon the Waters* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

by the emerging market for “worship consultants” tasked with empowering congregations to reclaim their voices.⁵

But what is it about the communal act of producing sound through voices that inspires such intense attention over its practice? Why does it matter if congregations sing? ⁶ Underlying these concerns is an assumption about the power of vocal acts: voices have the ability to *do* something in worship, both literally and metaphorically. Congregational singing has the capacity to accomplish liturgical actions, just as it facilitates community formation and catalyzes encounters between congregants and Christians around the world. An inquiry into the role of voices in worship represents a new way of considering the age-old problems of congregational participation raised above; and, by reinserting the voice into the conversation around liturgical action and worship, we can begin to explore the kinds of meaningful spiritual efficacy that voices carry through congregational singing.⁷

In order to theorize vocal acts within congregational singing, I first suggest that the practice requires a model of voice that emphasizes the *doing* of voices, shifting my

inquiry to the act of voicing rather than the voice as an object. Congregational singing is a performative act that must be communally produced; as a result, the voices (or communal voice, if one prefers) are only the result of that action. And it is clear from the flurry of public commentary cited above that *singing* (or not) is the primary concern, rather than “the voice.” As such, a performative model of voicing allows us to consider the specific priorities of congregational singing as practice.⁸

However, a shift toward vocal performance has consequences for the material voice—the sonic phenomenon produced by individual bodies. What role does sound play when the voice is considered through its practice, rather than through its materiality? Such a question is particularly pertinent to music scholars, who are understandably preoccupied with the characteristics and meanings of sound. Drawing on recent musicological work on voice by Brian Kane, I explore how the act of congregational singing has the capacity to redefine established relationships between sound, content, and source, three components that comprise Kane’s model of voice.⁹ The act of congregational singing therefore destabilizes vocal sound as a category, due to shifting priorities over language comprehension, musical style, and intensity of community participation. In addition, I posit that the practice of congregational singing represents a fruitful case study for formulating theories of

⁵ Well-known examples include John Bell and Alice Parker, both of whom travel extensively throughout the U.S. and U.K. for this purpose. The nonprofit Music that Makes Community holds workshops to empower laity to lead music congregationally and further invite their own congregations to sing; see www.musicthatmakescommunity.org.

⁶ Note here that as an ethnographer, my concern is practical rather than theological. In essence, I am not asking why congregations *should* sing, but rather what motivates singing when it occurs, therefore prioritizing the experiential motivations of congregational practice.

⁷ I do not mean to suggest here that a theorization of voicing can fully account for the dearth of congregational singing in mainline contexts; rather, this work is intended to excavate the motivations undergirding concerns over congregational musical participation through focusing on voices.

⁸ Marcel Steuernagel has traced the concept of performativity into the congregational music scene in a recent conference paper presented to the Society of Christian Scholarship in Music (2016), “Between Kantor and Frontman: Gesture as a Source of Authentication and Context Creation in South Brazilian Lutheran Congregational Worship.”

⁹ Brian Kane, “The Model Voice,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 68/3 (2015).

voice that are both performative and communal. Through this exploration, I provide a conceptual framework for future investigations into the active potential of congregational singing, guiding us closer to understanding what voices have the capacity to do in worship.

Voice to Voicing: A Performative Vocal Turn

Humanistic scholarship within recent decades has undergone a vocal turn, resonating through fields as diverse as anthropology, philosophy, sociology, comparative literature, and media studies. Always “in between” the material and the metaphorical, the voice has been analyzed variously as a medium of communication, a source of political power, or a marker of subjective or collective identity, all in an attempt to understand the multifaceted nature of this embodied sonic phenomenon.¹⁰ Within religious discourses in particular, the voice is understood as a primary “domain [for] . . . the formation and expression of a religious sense of being-in-the-world.”¹¹ Such newfound attention to the voice in broader academic

discourse has catalyzed a similar interest within musicology, as music scholars attempt to tackle a subject that “is nothing if not boundless, furtive, and migratory, sometimes maddeningly so.”¹² Just as the skepticism directed toward formalisms has led voice scholars to investigate the relationality and permeable boundaries of voice, body, sound, and subject, others within music studies have reasserted the role of bodies and their musical interactions through an emphasis on performance. As Nicholas Cook noted, such a performative turn reveals “a gathering emphasis on performance as a fundamental dimension of music’s existence.”¹³ Drawing together the rich hermeneutical tradition in musicology with ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon’s oft-cited definition of ethnomusicology as “the study of people making music,” Cook suggests that understandings of musical meaning are most effective when they stem directly from studies of musical practice, an assertion that has spurred scholars to more closely examine musicking as an equally fruitful area of inquiry as “the music itself.”¹⁴

However, few scholars have explored the voice at the intersection of these two discursive turns, to investigate the doing of voices through practices of vocalization. Of the work that exists at this intersection, much has

¹⁰ For a thorough review of voice studies, see Amanda J. Weidman, “Anthropology and Voice,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014). For more recent approaches, see issues of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* and Konstantinos Thomaidis and Ben Macpherson, eds., *Voice Studies: Critical Approaches to Process, Performance and Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹¹ Don E. Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 3. Saliers’s somewhat phenomenological understanding of voice and subjectivity resonates with Gordon Adnams’s work on congregational singing; see “The Experience of Congregational Singing: An Ethno-Phenomenological Approach” (Ph.D. diss., University of Alberta, 2008). For more on voice and sonic transcendence, see Jeffers Engelhardt and Philip V. Bohlman, “Resounding Transcendence—an Introduction,” in *Resounding Transcendence: Transitions in Music, Religion, and Ritual*, ed. Jeffers Engelhardt and Philip V. Bohlman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² Martha Feldman, “The Interstitial Voice: An Opening,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 68/3 (2015): 656. Recent work on voice within musicology includes the colloquy “Why Voice Now” in *JAMS*, from which Feldman’s article comes, and the special issue “Voice Matters” in *Postmodern Culture* 24/3, edited by Annette Schlichter and Nina Sun Eidsheim.

¹³ Nicholas Cook, “We Are All (Ethno)Musicologists Now,” in *The New (Ethno)Musicologies*, ed. Henry Stobart (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56. For more on “musicking” as essential to music studies, see Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

focused on the physical process of producing vocal sound, utilizing sonographs and other measurable means to explore performance aspects like dialect or pronunciation, vowel placement, or vocal timbre.¹⁵ But recent musicological scholarship by Martha Feldman and Nina Sun Eidsheim seeks to understand the voice “from the perspective of verbs,” investigating the intersections of bodily practices, “action-based singing,” and vocal production.¹⁶ Such an analytic frame is unquestionably useful for many kinds of singing practices, which require a physical act to produce sounds that can be full of cultural or social meaning, and often point back to the corporeality of the producer through the voice’s materiality, or the body of the singer through its sound.¹⁷

Understanding the voice through the framework of production is crucial for any investigation into congregational singing as a communal practice.¹⁸ Scripturally, singing in/as worship is a command traceable across the Old and New Testaments, with roughly three-quarters of all Bible verses on music referring

to song.¹⁹ This imperative is particularly potent within the Psalms, in which practitioners are encouraged to “sing unto the Lord,” to “make a joyful noise,” and, at least six times, to “sing a new song.” While the content of what is sung shifts (for example, a new song or a joyful noise), the directive remains the same: sing!²⁰ Grounded in scripture, theologians ranging from early church fathers to denomination founders to contemporary liturgists emphasize the necessity of singing in worship, citing its beneficial influence on prayer, communication with the divine, and community formation.²¹ These psalmic passages are cited by many Christians as a call to action, a divine request to produce sounds through their voices, regardless of what is being sung. For theologians and practitioners alike, the concern is the act of singing, rather than the hermeneutic potential of “the voice” once it is produced.²² This articulation of the efficacy of physical action in worship parallels the performative nature of the liturgy more broadly, as both emphasize how worship and faith are enacted through lived experience,

¹⁵ Examples of this approach include Steven Feld et al., “Vocal Anthropology: From the Music of Language to the Language of Song,” in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004); Steven Rings, “Analyzing the Popular Singing Voice: Sense and Surplus,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 68/3 (2015).

¹⁶ Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 2–3; Martha Feldman, *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Nicholas Harkness’s theorization of voice as a “phonosonic nexus” also attempts to draw together these aspects of voice; see *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

¹⁸ Engelhardt and Bohlman rightly point out that this emphasis on production of sound in sacred space is centered in Western music (even though they refer directly to “musical specialists” like cantors and choirs); see “Resounding Transcendence,” 14.

¹⁹ Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 61.

²⁰ Begbie similarly points to the use of music as *music in action* within scripture, arguing that “it was something made and heard”; see *ibid.*, 60.

²¹ For an overview of the role of musical instruments and voices in scripture and the writings of early church fathers, see David Music, *Instruments in Church: A Collection of Source Documents* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998). For the role of music as communication in worship, see Thomas Troeger, *Music as Prayer: The Theology and Practice of Church Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a discussion of congregational identity specifically, see Timothy D. Son, *Ritual Practices in Congregational Identity Formation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

²² Stephen Webb connects the human “voice” to God’s voice as a part of his theological argument for singing; see *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004).

rather than being understood as abstract concepts.²³

One of the advantages of reconceptualizing congregational singing as an active practice is that it allows us to understand what the congregational voice can *do*, opening avenues to investigate the active capacities of the communal voice and its role in worship. Philosopher J. L. Austin famously asserted that the voice has the ability to accomplish specific actions through his construction of “performative utterances,” referring to spoken phrases that accomplish the action of the words within them. Austin’s performatives, like congregational singing, depend on a sonic utterance for the action to occur, though in his formulation, the action itself is defined by the words spoken and the contextual circumstances surrounding them. Yet, as Michelle Duncan argues, shifting to the “verb” of sung vocal acts through performativity “opens up a space in which to interrogate acts of utterance as material events and to investigate the effects of those events.”²⁴

However, there is a crucial difference in source between congregational singing on the one hand, and the vocal acts proposed by Austin and Duncan and those analyzed by Eidsheim and Feldman on the other. These scholars narrow their inquiries to the

vocalizations of individuals—a castrato, an opera singer, or a vocal student—and do not address communal practices of voice that occur across many singers simultaneously, mirroring a trend within the broader discourse of voice studies that privileges individual voices. As a result, group singing practices are often only addressed ethnographically, without any attempt to theorize the communal voice beyond its meaning or use within a particular group.²⁵ Stephen Connor has recently pointed to this gap in voice discourse, suggesting that scholars should turn their attention to what he terms “chorality,” or collective voice acts.²⁶

In what follows, I take up Connor’s charge by investigating congregational singing as a collective voice act, one that requires a rethinking of the role of sound in communal sung practice.

Sound in Voicing

The distinct risk in shifting one’s priority to the action of voices and away from voices themselves, especially for scholars of music, is the resulting de-emphasis of sound. While Eidsheim’s action-based singing in fact requires such a minimization for pedagogical purposes, an investigation of congregational singing should still consider the sounds of voices produced, even if the practice of creating sounds carries more theoretical and experiential

²³ See Mary E. McGann, *Exploring Music as Worship and Theology: Research in Liturgical Practice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 7–10. The field of ritual studies often directly addresses the intersection of performance and religious action; for more, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). For a recent application of ritual theory to communal musicking practice, see Helen Phelan, *Singing the Rite to Belong: Ritual, Music, and the New Irish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁴ Michelle Duncan, “The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16/3 (2004): 289.

²⁵ For examples, see Gregory F. Barz, *Performing Religion: Negotiating Past and Present in Kwaya Music of Tanzania* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003); Karen Ahlquist, ed., *Chorus and Community*, vol. 2 (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006); and Caroline Bithell, *A Different Voice, a Different Song: Reclaiming Community through the Natural Voice and World Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁶ Steven Connor, “Choralities,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 13/1 (2016).

weight.²⁷ So how can we consider sound through the lens of vocal acts?

Brian Kane's recent theorization of voice offers a productive way to engage with vocal sound and its interactions with other aspects of "voice" as it is traditionally understood. Kane proposes that voice consists of three main components: *echos* (the sound produced), *logos* (the content of the utterance) and *topos* (the source from which the voice emits).²⁸ These three aspects of sound, content, and source are derived from philosopher Mladen Dolar's work on voice, in which he systematically reduces each one of these aspects to reveal the Other that is always present within the voice, an argument inspired by the psychoanalytic philosophy of Jacques Lacan.²⁹ Kane takes Dolar's breakdown of component voice parts as a starting point for his own model and suggests instead that voice is comprised of the *circulation* of sound, content, and source, rather than being the reduction of any term. Kane further suggests that the pairings of these aspects—content and sound, sound and source, source and content—can serve as useful theoretical frameworks for contextually

determined investigations of voices. In Kane's model, the sound of the voice (or voices) cannot be understood on its own terms, nor is it the determining factor in analyzing voice; instead, sound must be examined through its relations with content and/or source.³⁰

For any kind of investigation of voice as action, such a model has three main benefits: one, it allows for any one of the components of voice (content, sound, or source) to be scrutinized in relation to the other components, thereby avoiding a discussion of voice that is overdetermined by a preoccupation with one of these aspects. At the same time, however, Kane's model allows for scholars to assert the place of sound and the materiality of the voice in investigations of voicing, even if they are not the primary object of inquiry. Taking Eidsheim's case study of the singing lesson as a starting point, for example, Kane's model allows for a fruitful exploration of the sound produced through action-based singing

²⁷ Eidsheim's intention is to require students to focus solely on the act of production *instead* of the sound that emits, recognizing that previous pedagogical models begin with an ideal sound that singers are trying to replicate. See Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*, 132–53.

²⁸ Kane, "The Model Voice." Kathryn Meizel's "vocality," while it is intended toward connecting voice and identity, shares some similarities with Kane's voice: her vocality comprises productive (source of sound), acoustic (way sound is structured), and perceptual (sensations produced by sound) aspects. See "A Powerful Voice: Investigating Vocality and Identity," *Voice and Speech Review* 7/1 (2011): 269.

²⁹ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). For Kane's critique of Dolar and his explanation of philosophical voice studies as a response to Derrida, see *Sound Unseen: Aconsmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 180–222.

³⁰ This model of voice is particularly useful because it avoids a reduction into a single aspect or pairing, which is common in previous scholarship on the voice. For example, while Jakobson's six functions of language address the content of utterances and their situational contexts, his analysis is grounded in the communicative function of speech, and does not address the physical presence or bodily practices of the speaker, nor the actual sound of the utterance; see Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960). Bauman and Briggs similarly address the content of utterances in their work on contextualization, but again do not include vocal sound or source in their work; see Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990). In addition, while work by Bakhtin and Goffman critically examines the "source" of voicing through theorizations of heteroglossia/polyphony and performance, respectively, neither includes both content and sound in his analysis; see Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Random House, 1956).

and its relationship to the physical actions of the body, representing the crossing between sound and source. Finally, these crossings provide a useful framework to explore how the different components of voice work together in practice, and how these components are ontologically redefined and negotiated through the act of voicing. In the singing lesson, then, a student's sound is redefined as the direct result of physical actions that point to the student's bodily practices as a source, giving it an ontological status that is not only beyond materiality, but is also devoid of content as a useful analytic. I use Kane's model here as a framework to investigate how the vocal sounds produced in congregational singing can be re-examined through an action-based understanding of the crossings that sound participates in: sound–source and sound–content.³¹

Congregational Singing: Sound ↔ Source

It is a common trope within the discourse of voice studies that the sound produced through one's voice often points back to its source.³² On the most basic level, Adriana Cavarero argues that the sound of the voice is an index of individual uniqueness, thereby attributing aural characteristics to subjectivity. No one's voice sounds the same as another's, says Cavarero, and therefore each person's uniqueness as a subject can be heard and recognized in their voice.³³ Indeed, much scholarship in popular music takes this

philosophical argument as a given, investigating the timbral and performance markers that distinguish particular artists from one another, while other music scholars explore how these same aspects of timbre and performative expressions are understood as indices of racialized or gendered bodies.³⁴ Vocal source therefore can be understood both as the physical body of a vocal producer and as the aural characteristics of that body heard in the voice.

The practice of congregational singing, however, complicates the traditional understanding of vocal source. Perhaps most obviously, the “source” of congregational singing consists of many voices and individuals, rather than a single body. This multiplicity of bodies poses issues for Cavarero's ontology of uniqueness: individual voices are neither heard nor recognized in group singing, so their sound cannot be directly tied to their subjectivities or their bodies. An argument could be made to extend Cavarero's assertion of vocal uniqueness to groups, especially in cases of professional choral ensembles that meticulously curate their sound. Yet, a congregation's sound can change from week to week, indeed even from song to song within a single service, depending on the level of participation and the identities of people present.

While such shifting of personnel does create a series of “unique” sounds, this set of varying sounds is attributable to a single body of participants. Thus, the very fact that the “same” congregation can produce different sounds destabilizes the idea of directly

³¹ In employing Kane's model toward the analysis of musical practice, I am responding to the challenge proposed by Steven Rings and Kane himself; see Rings, “Analyzing the Popular Singing Voice: Sense and Surplus,” 667; and Kane, “The Model Voice.”

³² For a critique of this, see Kane, *Sound Unseen*.

³³ Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 1–16.

³⁴ Examples emblematic of these two approaches include Rings, “Analyzing the Popular Singing Voice: Sense and Surplus”; and Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera,” *American Quarterly* 63/3 (2011).

attributing vocal sound to source, because the source is not defined by a specific makeup of individuals. The qualities of each voice, then, do not necessarily determine the overall congregational sound. Or, in Connor's words, "the choric voice gives rise to the fantasy of a collective voice-body that is not to be identified with any of the individuals who compose it."³⁵ My own ethnographic work with congregations not only supports Connor's assertion, but suggests that individuals actively resist identification within congregational singing, as many of my interlocutors express a strong desire *not* to be heard.

If the sound of a congregation singing is not aurally reducible to individual voices, what is the nature of the relationship between sung congregational sound and the body (and bodies) of worshippers from which it comes? First, rather than being understood primarily in terms of vocal quality, congregational singing should instead be analyzed in terms of quantity: the sheer number of voices present. For many mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations, for example, ideal congregational sound is additive—the more voices, the better—contributing to what Connor refers to as the "pure magnitude" of chorality. Connor alludes to Elias Canetti's work on the "agglomerative impulse" of crowd sound to partially explain choral magnitude, describing the process of more voices being swept up into a group's sound, and the necessary space that is taken up by the corporeal producers of that sound.³⁶ But while Connor's focus is on the intensity of sound created through increased volume, congregational singing as a practice demands a different analytic frame: indeed, anyone who has spent time worshipping in a

mainline Protestant church would disagree with (and might even laugh at!) the idea of choral volume as a determining factor for congregational singing. Instead, the pure magnitude of chorality within congregational vocal practice lies in the widespread participation of individuals: the number of voices comprising the choral sound that results from a high percentage of participation.

Many congregations consider themselves to be participatory musical communities at their core, as their performative "success" is "judged by the degree and intensity of participation," in Thomas Turino's words, meaning that "everyone's contribution is valued and considered essential."³⁷ Congregational singing is intended to be an activity for all those who are gathered, especially because it is one of the only moments in a typical mainline Protestant liturgy in which congregants can engage. The imperative of widespread participation can be traced back specifically to the Reformational theologies of Martin Luther, who drew an explicit connection between his doctrine of the royal priesthood of all believers and congregational singing.³⁸ Each individual worshipper is expected to participate, not only for their own spiritual formation, but also to aid in corporate praise, with God as the primary (and only)

³⁵ Connor, "Choralities," 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁷ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 33.

³⁸ Robin A. Leaver, "Liturgical Music as Corporate Song 1: Hymnody in Reformation Churches," in *Liturgy and Music: Lifetime Learning*, ed. Robin A. Leaver and Joyce Ann Zimmerman (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 283. In addition, the painstaking documentation of the historical and denominational developments in congregational song that comprise the academic discipline of hymnology points to the longstanding importance of congregational sung worship within Protestant, Reformed, Evangelical, and Catholic communities.

audience.³⁹ In addition, Turino argues that the success of participatory communities is explicitly *not* judged by “some abstracted assessment of musical sound quality,” further illuminating the transition of sonic importance from quality to quantity.⁴⁰ In these communities, as in congregational singing, widespread participation overrides concerns regarding musical competence, as it is much more important for congregation members to sing than it is for them to sing *well*. The shift from product to process within congregational singing is, according to Linda Clark, a fundamentally ethical one, as it allows for the widespread participation necessary for worship to take place.⁴¹

Moreover, congregational singing complicates the role of individual bodies within a *topos* defined by a group of participants. For singing groups like choirs, the “grain of the voice” that is attributable to each individual voice is subjectively and communally identified, as individual singers adjust their own sound with that of others around them in service of an ideal communal sound.⁴² Choral singing depends on the aural corporeality of each individual body as integral components of its voice. Yet, many congregations have no “ideal sound,” creating instead something closer to heterogeneous noise than meticulously crafted harmony. Within this sound, the bodies behind individual voices may be heard without being

identifiable, depending on anything from a space’s acoustics to the intensity of listening undertaken by participants.⁴³ The congregational sound can be considered as an assemblage, in Manuel DeLanda’s terms, within which the fluidity of identifiable sonic contributions does not negate the autonomy of each participant.⁴⁴ In addition, this sound is created through the bodily practices of singing together, of which vocal production is only one part.⁴⁵ Congregational vocal sound therefore sits at the intersection of choric and solo, whole and part; the contributions of individuals may be heard without being identified, but do not override the communal sound.

Yet, because each congregant physically generates their own voice within congregational singing, individuals retain bodily autonomy through production, even when their “bodies” are not audible. In his analysis of the choric voice, Connor posits that group singing could be analyzed as a manifestation of the acousmatic voice, since the sound is not traceable to a specific visible source.⁴⁶

However, I suggest that the voicing of congregational song turns the acousmatic voice on its head: the presence of participating bodies is affirmed through congregational singing, regardless of the audibility of their

³⁹ Brian Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 85.

⁴⁰ Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 33.

⁴¹ Linda Clark, “The Difference between Concert Music and Music for Worship,” in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville, TN: StarSong, 1994), 104.

⁴² This is one interpretation of what Roland Barthes calls “the grain of the voice”; see “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

⁴³ While not the focus of this article, the interaction between listening and voicing in congregational practice deserves further inquiry.

⁴⁴ See Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London: Continuum, 2006). DeLanda’s understanding of assemblage theory builds on the work of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; see *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988).

⁴⁵ For example, see Nathan Myrick, “Relational Power, Music, and Identity: The Emotional Efficacy of Congregational Song,” *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* 3/1 (2017).

⁴⁶ Connor, “Choralities,” 5–6.

voices or the visibility of their bodies. Such an analysis of sound and source in congregational vocal practice also attests to the “inescapably *bodily*” nature of musicking that carries theological weight for scholars like Jeremy Begbie and Don Saliers; individual worshippers gain the spiritual benefits of vocally participating through their bodies without any repercussions for the quality or audibility of their voices.⁴⁷

Further, for many practitioners and theologians alike, the role of individual bodies within congregational singing must be negotiated with the unifying power of singing as one body, one voice. Kathleen Harmon points to this juxtaposition of subjective bodily experience with collective identity formation as crucial to understanding the power of song in worship as opposed to speech. For Harmon, singing “elaborates the resonance of the body’s center,” which confirms to participants both their presence as individuals and their connections to other bodies. As a result, “the sense of increased autonomy which is generated by the body’s expansion through breath in singing is transmuted into a sense of collective identity in the experience of communal singing.”⁴⁸ Harmon’s recognition of communal experience resonates with theological writings on congregational singing, which often see one’s individual singing experience as subordinate to the experience and efficacy of collective voicing. “Few things can be more pleasing to the Lord,” wrote early Methodist bishops Thomas Coke and Francis

Ashbury in 1797, “than a congregation, with one heart and one voice, praising His holy name.”⁴⁹

The practice of singing hymns has often been cited as a pathway toward promoting congregational unity through its expression of common theological ground; yet, its unifying power is understood to reach beyond the walls of the sanctuary, “affirm[ing] the participants’ place within the universal church.”⁵⁰ Singing together in worship therefore not only symbolizes unity, but engages the “body of Christ,” a phrase often cited by practitioners to describe the worldwide ecumenical community of Christian followers.⁵¹ While the use of the term “body of Christ” can differ denominationally, it stems from the writings of the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians:

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.⁵²

By singing together, practitioners both identify their gathering as a manifestation of the body of Christ, and assert their place in the wider body of Christian followers. *Topos*, then,

⁴⁹ Fred Kimball Graham, “*With One Heart and One Voice*.” *A Core Repertory of Hymn Tunes Published for Use in the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States, 1808–1878* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), xv.

⁵⁰ See Martin V. Clarke, “Meet and Right It Is to Sing: Nineteenth-Century Hymnals and the Reasons for Singing,” in *Music and Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Martin V. Clarke (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

⁵¹ This is only one of many definitions of the “body of Christ,” a term that is employed to a variety of theological ends; however, this is the most common usage in my ethnographic contexts.

⁵² 1 Corinthians 12: 12–14 (KJV).

⁴⁷ See Saliers, *Music and Theology*; Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴⁸ Kathleen Harmon, “Liturgical Music as Prayer,” in *Liturgy and Music: Lifetime Learning*, ed. Robin A. Leaver and Joyce Ann Zimmerman (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 272.

resonates across three distinct registers: the body of an individual worshipper, the body of worshippers gathered, and the body of Christ worldwide. *Echos* can be said to be produced at each one of these levels; indeed, an argument could be made that through the singing of the music of another community, whether a predominantly Anglo church singing African-American gospel music or a missionized church in China singing Western hymns, practitioners are singing the body of Christ into their own spaces through their voices.⁵³ The practice of congregational singing therefore disrupts the traditional relationship of *echos* and *topos* within the voice, due to the expansion of *topos* to include many voices, the privileging of widespread vocal action through participation over the resulting sound, and the circulating roles of individual, communal, and global bodies.⁵⁴

Congregational Singing: Sound ↔ Content

When the term *logos* is invoked within Christian music spaces, its definition is often confined to words: the Word of scripture, the Word within a homily, the Word of God made flesh. In church music, as in Christianity more broadly, voice is therefore reduced to a carrier of *logos*, due to the privileging of the biblical and liturgical Word within theoretical and practical theology.⁵⁵ Even when sound is considered, its role is often subservient to *logos*, useful only to animate the words being sung or spoken. As a result, discussions of hymnody and

congregational song across various disciplinary perspectives often reflect this logocentric ideology. Historical debates over musical appropriateness were centered on the comprehensibility of the words, such as the reformation of polyphony enacted through the Council of Trent, and the subsequent celebration of homophony audible in Palestrina and later Reformed hymnody alike. Hymnologists have long considered hymn texts and tunes separately, a result not only of the methods of authorship and combinatory possibilities of texts and tunes, but also of the perceived importance of lyrical efficacy. Couched in arguments over appropriate musical style—especially within the recent worship wars—scholars often focus on the (sometimes theologically problematic) lyrics of Contemporary Christian worship songs as a site for discussion and dissent.⁵⁶

The relationship between music and words in Christian discourse has been long debated: should the music be subservient to the Word, or should it work in conjunction with it? For Renaissance and Reformation Christians especially, the comprehensibility of the words was crucial not only for congregational listeners, but for singing participants as well: the efficacy of hymnody depended on people understanding what they were singing. Denominational fathers like John Wesley and John Calvin therefore advocated for simple musical settings, which served both to clarify

⁵³ I am currently pursuing this line of inquiry in my own work on global song and music from Taizé.

⁵⁴ The emphasis on participation through vocalization could be said to mirror the attention paid within Protestant theologies to process over product.

⁵⁵ Engelhardt and Bohlman also point to the centrality of the word in discussions of sacred voice; see “Resounding Transcendence,” 14.

⁵⁶ These debates can be found in Richard J. Mouw, *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007). Even within ethnomusicological or musicological approaches to congregational singing, the words of songs and hymns continue to be prioritized as the main concern for practitioners; for example, see Jeff Todd Titon, *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988).

the words being sung and to encourage hearty participation.⁵⁷ Music's role was to amplify the lyrical content, working in service to the words. Luther, on the other hand, believed that musical sound and Word must work in tandem for the message to fulfill both its intended liturgical role and its role as a manifestation of God's creativity through human invention.⁵⁸ Luther's position is echoed by Kathryn Nichols, who writes that "the inherent powers of language are magnified when married to music and used as a vehicle for praise," as this marriage has the ability to express something "deeper" than the words alone.⁵⁹ Regardless of the position taken vis-à-vis music and lyrical content in worship, it is clear that *logos* has long dominated discussions of church music and its practice.

This is not to say, however, that musical genre plays no role in church music debates. Taking the worship wars as a recent example, the appropriateness of popular music as a congregational music genre has been critiqued at least as often as the lyrics of Contemporary Worship Music. The music of CWM relies on a set of sounds associated with "secular" or commercial genres, from the rock-band-style instrumentation of contemporary praise bands to the vocal markers of personal authenticity heard in performances by worship celebrities. While scholars have extensively documented the discomfort and disagreement surrounding the use of these genres in worship, their analyses do not center the production of the

sounds of popular music genres within the voice. After all, debates about CWM were not solely about what was being *heard* in a church context, but also about what was being *sung*. The sounds of CWM—the simple melodies, syncopated rhythms, and lack of "traditional" four-part homophonic motion—can be directly tied to the actions of voices, because congregational voicing necessarily includes the musical characteristics of what is being sung. In turn, it is these musical characteristics that are deemed to directly affect congregational participation, as the online critics cited above attest.⁶⁰

While the sounds of a particular musical genre can be attributed to *echos*, an expanded understanding of *logos* as linguistic and musical content, rather than just words, may begin to account for the extramusical meaning attributed to those genres by practitioners and critics alike. Continuing with the example of CWM, early critiques of popular music's usage in worship viewed the bass-driven and syncopated rock genres as evidence of the devil's work, due to their ability to entice young people toward licentious and disreputable activities.⁶¹ For these critics, the musical

⁵⁷ On Wesley, see Graham, *With One Heart and One Voice*, 5.

⁵⁸ Joyce L. Irwin, *Neither Voice nor Heart Alone: German Lutheran Theology of Music in the Age of the Baroque* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 3.

⁵⁹ Kathryn L. Nichols, "Music and Musicians in the Service of the Church," in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville, TN: StarSong, 1994), 95.

⁶⁰ Monique Ingalls has written about the connections between sung participation and contemporary worship music as representative of an understanding of "authentic worship," and the connections between this idea and authenticity gestures within popular music; see "Awesome in This Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship" (Ph. D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008), chaps. 4–5.

⁶¹ For the histories of these positions, see Anna E. Nekola, "Between This World and the Next: The Musical 'Worship Wars' and Evangelical Ideology in the United States, 1960–2005" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2009), chap. 3; and Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck, *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004). For the racial implications of this argument, see John Haines, "The

content, or *logos*, of this sung music necessarily carried these demonic associations, marking it as both inappropriate and dangerous for congregational worship. Again, it is important to note that it is not “the music itself” that poses a threat, but its vocal performance, as it is the act of congregational voicing that has the potential to catalyze such dire consequences. Similarly, popular music’s entanglements with capitalism are recognized as an integral part of the music’s content, whether celebrated as allowing the Word of God to enter the secular sphere or reviled for allowing the contamination of the sacred. This extramusical association of commercialism, like the fear of sex, drugs, and rock and roll, is ever-present within congregational performances of CWM, leading to logistical concerns over whose music is being sung and how it is being paid for.⁶² Through this broader understanding of *logos* beyond words, scholars can better account for the multifaceted role of musical genres and music’s connotations and denotations within vocal performance as *logos*, and consider the effect of musical genre on the efficacy of congregational singing in a new way. *Logos* is thus redefined as an important site of the “in-between” character of the voice through performance, signifying meaning beyond words and music alone.

Expanding *logos* to include musical content also makes space for the placement of “music” within the voice. Indeed, music could be identified as purely *logos*, or content, a position

that has preoccupied music scholars within several subfields. Historically, music theorists have pinpointed the content of music within the musical score, identifying complex harmonic patterns, formal structures, and rhythmic intricacies without hearing a single sound. Beyond the notational surface, much ink has been spilled in the service of documenting the semantic capabilities of music: its symbolic and semiotic properties, its descriptive qualities, its metaphorical meaning. Countless parallels between musical structure and linguistic grammar further stress the ability of music to exhibit language-like properties of carrying content, and musical hermeneutics continues to be a dominant analytical paradigm within musicology. In addition, sung music (as explored above) carries words (literally, *logos*), adding yet another dimension for understanding music as content. However, no matter how abstract one’s analysis of a musical surface may be, music necessarily carries a sonic aspect that cannot be reducible to “content.” *Echos* therefore rears its head, impossible to ignore in performance no matter the musical “content.” The juxtaposition of musical “content” and sonic aspects of performance has theological implications as well, as articulated by William Flynn:

Theologically speaking, one could contend that music is both more than and less than the Word. Music is less than the Word, in that the *logos* of God incarnate as Jesus Christ is witnessed to in the words of scripture . . . music may be more than the Word, in that scripture must be proclaimed, that is, it must be effectively delivered.⁶³

Emergence of Jesus Rock: On Taming the ‘African Beat,’” *Black Music Research Journal* 31/2 (2011).

⁶² Nekola argues for the essential role of commercialism within American evangelicalism; see “Between This World and the Next”; and “Negotiating the Tensions of U.S. Worship Music in the Marketplace,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities*, ed. Suzel Ana Reily and Jonathan M. Dueck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁶³ William T. Flynn, “Liturgical Music as Liturgy,” in *Liturgy and Music: Lifetime Learning*, ed. Robin A. Leaver and Joyce Ann Zimmerman (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 253.

While he does not specifically state the type of music he is referring to, it is safe to assume that Flynn's primary concern here is with vocal music. He conflates music and sound within the voice: music is only understood through the sonic ineffability that results from its performance. But music is not reducible to *echos* either; by being "more than the Word," vocal music must also carry some content, whether *logos* in its traditionally understood definition or a broader understanding of musical content. Within the voice, music therefore sits at the intersection of *logos* and *echos*, without being reducible to one or the other.⁶⁴ Understanding music's overlapping *logos*- and *echos*-functions therefore offers a new lens for examining the historical and contemporary disputes over musical genre in congregational sung practices by creating space for genre-based musical characteristics within the sound of the congregational voice. And it is only through the event of voicing, through the participation of communal voices, that this dual role of music comes to the fore.

Active Voicing to Acts of Voicing

Recognizing congregational singing as an active communal practice centered in the voice opens up new possibilities for the analysis of sound in worship. Congregational sound is fundamentally shaped by the multiplicity of sources from which congregational singing emits—both the literal bodies of congregants and the imagined community of fellowship beyond a single

gathering. Through their physical vocal participation, individuals participate in the creation of a communal sound while simultaneously veiling their own sonic contributions. But congregations are not professional choirs, so some "bodies" are more aurally present than others. How do these aural assertions of presence affect the way congregants understand their role within a community, or within the body of Christ writ large? The attention to the sound—source crossing may be able to productively illuminate how issues of power are negotiated aurally within congregational singing, especially when some voices (and bodies) dominate over others. In addition, an investigation into communal sound and source also leads to questions regarding the efficacy of participatory communities. If congregational sung efficacy is judged by the "quantity" of voices rather than their "quality," are there any standards to which quality must be held? What are the stakes of participation if individual participants' voices are so hidden that communal sound is not produced? Or, in other words, if a healthy congregation is a singing congregation, is a congregation unhealthy if their singing doesn't make a sound? These questions also lead to the role of silence in sung liturgy, and how the voice participates in—and even creates—silence within worship contexts. While answers to these questions may be contextually dependent, probing the categories of sound and source opens up new ways to approach vocal performance and spiritual efficacy within worship contexts.

Congregational sound is inextricable from content, especially when the sound produced is musical. The expansion of *logos* to include musical content can therefore shed light on disputes within historical and contemporary

⁶⁴ The recognition of the irreducibility of music and words and the importance of context in vocal performance resonates with Emma Dillon's theorization of "supermusicality"; see *The Sense of Sound: Musical Meaning in France, 1260–1330* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For a recent discussion of Dillon and Augustine, see Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*, 125–26.

practices, especially the role of sound (and even bodies) in the production of the Word. In addition, this expansion can help address current repertoires like music from Taizé or global song that use foreign languages that may be incomprehensible to singers. This begs the question: Is “theologically appropriate” lyrical content a prerequisite for congregational performance, even when the lyrical content itself is incomprehensible? This question is particularly intriguing considering that work by Caroline Bithell suggests that at least within nonreligious contexts, singers of foreign languages focus more on the experiential feeling of the words than their meaning, often actively resisting comprehension of lyrical content in the process.⁶⁵ Is the presence of *logos* even necessary, then, or can musical content or a song’s original context serve the same purpose as words? Considering *logos* as content rather than just “words” opens up new avenues for investigating how musical genre functions within congregational singing, or even how musical characteristics like form, harmony, and melody directly affect communal vocal practice. Expanding *logos* also makes space for the metaphorical associations of voice to meet the material through performance; cultural and contextual meaning can circulate within *logos*, allowing *logos* to signify, to symbolize, to act.

⁶⁵ Bithell names this the “politics of unintelligibility”; see *A Different Voice, a Different Song*, 152–55.