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Congregational Conflict and Community

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Congregational Conflict and Community, by Jonathan Dueck. Congregational Music Studies Series. Abingdon, Oxon., and New York, NY: Routledge, 2017. 198 pp. ISBN: 978-1-472-47226-7.

Jonathan Dueck queries what he calls “productive conflict” (152) surrounding worship practice and styles within Mennonite worship communities in Edmonton, Alberta. His interest is in the “worship wars,” a broad set of conflicts commonly construed between older and younger Christian Protestant worshippers who seek either traditional or contemporary Christian worship forms according to their own musical tastes. Early in the monograph, Dueck observes that these worship wars are more nuanced than a divide between generational taste; rather, he says, “the relationships and meanings shaped through individuals’ experiences singing in the particular ways afforded by each style of worship are most profoundly at stake” (i). His work illuminates several types of conflict at the confluence of music and faith within three Mennonite congregations, and is more richly described and interpreted owing to Dueck’s position as a practicing Mennonite.

Dueck takes a three-pronged approach, detailing Canadian Mennonite worship practices in styles that he defines as “traditional,” “contemporary,” and “blended.” Chapter 2 shows Dueck’s categories in concert. He details the “aesthetics of encounter” at an inter-Mennonite Good Friday service in 2001, mounted in Edmonton as a collaboration among three congregations with vastly different stylistic sensibilities. This chapter illustrates the conflict alluded to in the book’s title: communities bound together by belief and religious investment are nevertheless made distinct through divergent musical and worship

styles. In the commingling worship service of these three congregations, stylistic distinctions are navigated, mediated, mitigated, and, ultimately, illuminated by congregants’ reactions to other groups’ aesthetics. In the following chapters, Dueck separates these categories into three individual case studies at churches in Edmonton.

Chapter 3 focuses on the congregation at First Mennonite Church, which Dueck identifies as espousing a “traditional” musical practice. The congregation values older hymnody and harmonized singing from Swiss, German, and particularly Russian Mennonite traditions, as well as classical choral fare. Dueck uses these musical choices as a jumping-off point for a broader discussion of musical genre and style as related to worship goals and community cohesion. Chapter 4 investigates the “contemporary” practice at River West Christian Church. River West’s use of amplification and complex sound systems, as well as its inclusion of Christian Contemporary Music (CCM), allows Dueck to trace ties between the Christian praise music industry, popular music industries, Mennonite contemporary practice, and Christian Evangelical worship. Chapter 5 shows how musical styles can be mixed in a “blended” worship aesthetic at Holyrood Mennonite Church, where the congregation is split between predominantly white Canadian members and recent Francophone African immigrants and refugees. The inclusion of music from African Christian traditions, played alongside familiar hymnody and choruses, indicates the endeavor to include and celebrate difference, rather than homogenizing musical styles in favor of one tradition over another. These two chapters deliberately focus on community stylistic choices and the language developed around these preferences, mediated through

private and public discussion between church officials, congregants, choir members, and music worship teams at the group and managerial levels.

Chapter 6 reframes Dueck's earlier fieldwork through the lens of the individual, focusing specifically on the ways in which everyone—congregants and worship leaders alike—identifies themselves within worship practice, style, and congregational community. Chapter 7 functions as both a summation of the previous chapters and a hybrid literature review, offering a look at ethnomusicological and religious scholarship pertaining to religious singing practices and the negotiated ethics of style.

Congregational Conflict and Community begins as a relatively traditional ethnomusicological ethnography focused on community-developed style and ethics within a surprisingly malleable set of worship frameworks. However, in the reframing in chapter 6, Dueck goes beyond the "music as community" paradigm to include individual memories, participations, tastes, and theological understandings in his readings of practices and worship services. The constant factor is Dueck's detailed and engaging field observations, which are included throughout each chapter in italicized blocks, sometimes functioning as introduction, sometimes as colorful detail, but always integral to the surrounding text that contextualizes, theorizes, and organizes. The fieldnotes and Dueck's theorization are deftly bonded; explaining that he prefers to allow his interlocutors to speak (and sing) for themselves, he refrains from applying any theoretical framework that would detract from their self-conceptualization. However, surface readings of these self-conceptualizations may not offer a deep enough interpretation to do justice to the nuance of language, meaning, and custom evident in

interlocutors' self-assessments. Dueck addresses this issue in chapter 6, where he turns to the early linguistics-focused work of Stephen Feld, as well as investigations of style by Dick Hebdige and Timothy Rommen, to grant each individual multiple memberships, inclinations, aesthetic concerns, memories, and performative and social identities. These micro-cosmic conflicts and intersections within the individual mirror the macro-conflict of the broader worship wars.

This reframing is perhaps most striking in the context of Dueck's fieldwork in the "contemporary" setting, River West Christian Church. Here, the popularity of Contemporary Christian Music offers intersections with a thriving local music industry, the worldwide Christian praise music industry, and youth popular culture and music. This fieldsite is especially rich because it allows Dueck to interrogate Mennonite connections with other religious movements, including the Christian Evangelical movement, in which CCM became popular as an enticement for youth participants. It is through River West's use of CCM, sometimes referred to by traditionalists as "Jesus-is-my-boyfriend-music" (27), that Dueck offers his most diverse work surrounding the worship wars. He probes the collective and individual memories of his interlocutors, young and old, to discuss how CCM is used and conceptualized within the structure of a worship service, and how that structure is itself derived from earlier forms of new worship music made popular in the 1970s and 1980s.

Indeed, memory of experiences with liturgical music is the most persistent underlying discussion throughout Dueck's work. He often returns to memory as a guide for an individual's stylistic aesthetic and personal understanding of the practice of worship. Every

so often, he includes “embodiment” as a parameter of memory and affect, as in chapter 5, where he invokes Gordon Adnams’s recent work on embodied feelings surrounding worship music and practice. “[W]e need to take account of the ways this sense of presence allows for individual worshippers to mutually identify with one another,” Dueck subsequently deduces, “because of their shared recognition of an encounter with God in worship music” (117). Some further discussion of the individual physicalized experience, as mediated by physical and emotional response *before* the connection with others within this experience, could deepen this conclusion; this could be achieved simply by reinterpreting existing fieldnotes. Though many of Dueck’s notes mention the physical aspects of sitting in one of the sanctuaries and experiencing music in many guises—accompanied or unaccompanied; with or without a song leader; with amplification or unplugged—the architecture of the building, the fullness of the sanctuary, and even the seating options and arrangements could lead to memorialized experience of embodied affect. This is hinted throughout, but Dueck, perhaps due to the already complex frame-and-reframe structure of his work, focuses on the connection between others. Inclusion of this site-specific dimension could more firmly attach to Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s “wasp and orchid” that, in chapter 6, Dueck suggests is a metaphor akin to the moments of complete immersion and connection in worship.

Dueck does seem aware of the connections between space, sound, and the body within experiential memory of worship and community. In a vignette presented in his last chapter, he highlights a story from the choir director at First Methodist Church, who talks about congregational singing at a fiftieth-anniver-

sary event. After describing tempo changes and overall vocal volume and gusto, words (the focus of the earlier chapters’ stylistic discussions) fail the director. “That place was packed. Everybody was singing at the top of what they sing, and we just [he pauses and inhales deeply and dramatically] . . . It was really something else . . .” (165–66). Dueck beautifully frames this discussion as indicative of community cohesion and the fulfillment and creation of communal memory that each individual repeatedly inscribes and reinscribes throughout their worship activities. This shows a deep connection to recent works by Timothy Rommen and Jeffers Engelhardt, which posit that style in religious musical practice is integrally related to implicit and explicit understandings of particularity in community and communal space.

Congregational Conflict and Community offers much to scholars from a variety of fields: ethnomusicology and anthropology, certainly, but also religious studies, cultural studies, music psychology, sound studies, and voice studies. Several kinds and sizes of conflict are described in the book, highlighting different approaches and aims in worship, musical ability and technique, and even liturgical and musical pedagogies. The prose is bound tight with Dueck’s sensitively wrought portraits of his Mennonite peers and, indeed, himself within the systems he describes. Eschewing judgment or even clear stylistic preference, Dueck listens for the passions and investments of his interlocutors, and finds multiple frames to amplify their voices within the structure of his work.

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