Ethics and Christian Musicking

Kathryn M. Cooke

Columbia University

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Ethics and Christian Musicking
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Ethics and Christian Musicking is the fifth edited volume in the Congregational Music Studies series. The field of congregational music studies is distinguished from general scholarship on Christian music by its focus on the people who practice music making in contemporary Christianity, which is inherently interdisciplinary in its engagement with fields such as (ethno)musicology, theology, anthropology, and sociology. This volume, edited by Nathan Myrick and Mark Porter, addresses a lacuna in the series: ethics, a crucial factor in musical activity and practices, is usually mentioned in congregational music literature but has rarely been the primary focus or framework for approaching any of these studies. Myrick and Porter clearly state that the purpose of this collection is to insert the newest studies in congregational Christian music in current and larger (ethno)musicological dialogues by framing Christian musicking around ethical considerations. By fulfilling their purpose, the editors hope to emphasize the significance of the essays in this volume as they expand beyond Christian music spheres. Ethics and Christian Musicking offers a formidable and diverse range of studies which scholars from various academic fields, as well as congregational worship music practitioners, can draw from in order to better acquaint themselves with the emerging field of congregational music studies.

The book is divided into four parts: “The Body and Beyond,” “Fulfilling Responsibilities and Negotiating Values,” “Identity and Encounter,” and “Valuing the Self.” Myrick and Porter intend for this collection to be diverse not only in its topics and styles, but also in its authors, who come from different cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. While multiple renditions of diversity are included in the book, one prominent absence in the first part is worth noting: a perspective from disability studies, which often intersects with sound studies and has become increasingly prominent in ethnomusicological studies. As unfortunate as this absence is, “The Body and Beyond” still provides a thorough historical overview of conversations concerning embodied worship music in essays by Marcell Silva Steuernagel, as well as two profound case studies of embodied worship musicking from Marcel Cobussen and Bo kyung Blenda Im.

Steuernagel’s “Praise, Politics, Power: Ethics of the Body and Christian Musicking” appropriately introduces the first section’s focus on the history of music, religion, and the body, as well as their fraught relationships with one another. Steuernagel urges the reader to consider that musical sound deeply engages the worshipping body and that western Christian musicking body ethics have permeated congregational Christian music practices as much as western hymnody has. This introductory
chapter quickly shows the reader the benefits of analyzing Christian musicking through the lens of ethics and allows the next two case-study chapters to shine. Im’s article wraps up the first section through a case study of Black gospel music performed by the Heritage Mass Chorus in South Korea. The narrative of the article is straightforward and intentional. Im carefully dissects and appreciates the specificity of Korean Christians performing Black gospel music by providing a historical narrative of embodied musicking in Korean Protestantism, giving voice to members of the Heritage Mass Chorus who have critically considered their worship practices, and highlighting an example from the 2013 Korean documentary *Black Gospel* in which the explanation of Black “soul” resonates deeply with Korean concepts of *han* and *maum*. Body ethics are addressed in a metaphorically mental sense by Im’s beautiful implication of Korean Protestant amnesia, which “forgets” American and Japanese colonialization, followed by its anamnesis, or “remembering,” through practicing Black gospel music, which was built upon acknowledging colonial trauma and letting it influence musical worship. Im’s intimate interweaving of theory, history, and reflections from her interlocutors makes her article a particular favorite of mine.

The second section, “Fulfilling Responsibilities and Negotiating Values,” addresses and dissects specific factors such as reverberation effects, amateurism, capital, and musical interpretation in regard to how they facilitate worship experiences for contemporary Christian congregations. I appreciate the close relation that Jeff R. Warren’s and Joshua Kalin Busman’s articles share by urging worship leaders and participants to think critically about their musical practices through both theoretical and practical means. Warren’s article focuses on a pitch-shifted reverberation effect, commonly called “shimmer,” which was popularized by rock bands from the 1980s to the early 2000s and has become a sonic staple in contemporary Christian worship music. Warren elaborates on the creation and dissemination of shimmer on both technical and historical levels, as well as on a markedly unique “carpentry” level in which he constructs his own shimmer effects that are adapted from various techniques used by worship musicians and producers. From there, Warren uses his self-constructed shimmer effects in congregational worship settings and observes how they impact his experience. Through his “carpentry” of shimmer, Warren provides worship practitioners with a methodology that encourages critical consideration of how each sonic component of contemporary worship music affects congregations. Busman seems to have a wider audience in mind, and his desire for nonacademic worship leaders to read his article and apply its contents to their next congregational gathering is apparent and well executed. It is therefore appropriate that the topic of Busman’s chapter is “amateurism” in worship music spaces and how it is constantly negotiated as musicians try to keep God as the focus of their musicking. By juxtaposing the amateurism seen in contemporary worship music with that seen in punk music, Busman insightfully complicates the ethics of performance responsibilities and invites fellow worship practitioners to ruminate on this tension. Warren’s and Busman’s articles flow seamlessly together as a set of theoretical and methodological tools
for academics and nonacademics alike who wish to dissect and critically analyze the sonic components of contemporary worship music.

As the volume’s only coauthored essay, “Hillsong and Black” by Tanya Riches and Alexander Douglas is a terrific demonstration of the diversity of nuances that can be drawn from collaborating with another scholar. I find the self-insertion and contemplation of the writers’ racial, gender, and professional identities refreshing as well as relevant in light of the theme of the book’s third section, “Identity and Encounter.” Riches is a white female who, at the time she wrote this article, was a staff member at the fieldsite of this study, Hillsong Church. Douglas is a Black male who has engaged with the music of Hillsong, but never with the church itself. The combination of their emic and etic approaches creates an analytical yet intimate approach that amplifies and centers the voices of their interlocutors. Through the demographic data of each interviewee, insightful excerpts from interviews, and thoughtful cross-analysis of said excerpts, Riches and Douglas are able to show the reader, rather than merely tell them about, the tensions that exist in the lamination of secular identity with spiritual identity through Hillsong’s musical practices.

The volume closes with “Valuing the Self.” Tamisha Tyler’s chapter “Beyoncé Mass and the Flourishing of Black Women” stands out as a study that fulfills Myrick and Porter’s desire to broadcast works that are pertinent to scholarly realms beyond Christian music. I do not say this just because of the current popularity of Beyoncé, but mainly because of the way Tyler positions herself amid Black womanist scholars as she highlights the keyword “flourishing.” By guiding the reader through what it means for Black women to flourish and how Beyoncé Mass is an example of the flourishing of Black women, Tyler’s article itself becomes a space of Black flourishing in her invitation and amplification of other Black scholars and theories. Tyler’s main theoretical frameworks come from scholars such as Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Hill Collins, who advocate for an understanding of womanist ontology and epistemology in order to truly perceive the flourishing of Black women that takes place in musical practices such as Beyoncé Mass. At Beyoncé Mass, Black women are given a space to use their voices to sing songs by Beyoncé that tell the stories of Black women as a way of reminding their souls that they are created in the image of God. Tyler’s study reveals the potential that congregational music studies has as a field that is relevant beyond Christian music spheres: there are contemporary Christian worship practices that are dismantling normative ideologies and ethical frameworks established by church contexts that typically exclude voices that are not hetero-cis, white, or male.

For the sake of brevity, I will not discuss every chapter in this edited collection; however, all of the studies featured in Ethics and Christian Musicking exemplify work at the forefront of congregational music studies. The book as a whole is filled with theoretical discussion, ethical tensions, and varying methodological approaches that will surely be a treasure trove for any scholar who wishes to familiarize themselves with historical and current conversations in the study of Christian musicking. I would also highly recommend this book to worship practitioners who are not familiar with
academic texts, but who still wish to critically consider the ways they worship the Lord through music. Overall, the Congregational Music Studies series has succeeded in producing another edited volume that challenges antiquated church traditions and highlights studies that show their care for Christian musicking through topically informed, interdisciplinary, and diverse methodologies.

Kathryn Minyoung Cooke
Columbia University
New York, New York