

How to Improve Our Singing!

By Bob Young

This article may not do much to change the way things are going in our churches. Remembering a phrase from my mother, I personally dislike writing in the “negative case and kickative mood,” but I feel compelled to speak. So, here goes!

Who am I? Why do I want to write about this? I began leading singing in church when I was about 12 years old. I began my university career as a music major and earned a minor in music. I excelled as a clarinetist, and won vocal awards. I continue to enjoy both instrumental and vocal music. Early on, I tried my hand at writing lyrics and music and concluded that nothing I was producing was fit for public consumption!

I have spent 50+ years in ministry and leadership in an *a cappella* religious fellowship, working in the local church and teaching Bible in the university. In my mission work, I have learned to enjoy many emotionally rich, theologically informed, songs in Spanish.

A few important observations

Good songs depend on both lyrics and music. Being raised in *a cappella* churches, I quickly learned that the lyrics matter. Without instruments to cover up poor, unsingable, un-understandable lyrics, the singing must stand on its own. The lyrics are important; the music is important. Writing either requires great skill. Even greater skill is required to integrate lyrics and music into songs with melodies that support the message. Well-written music empowers singing that touches thinking and emotions (hearts) and encourages shared lives.

“Eternal” songs combine meaningful words and meaningful melodies and harmonies with good theology and good grammar. Songs that are poorly written, theologically lacking, and grammatically incorrect do not last long. Some Christian songs have been around for hundreds of years and will continue to be sung because they are great, “eternal” songs. Many of today’s songs fit into the “pop” category – reflecting what is currently popular. Few of the songs being written and sung today will be around long, in the same way that many of the popular songs in the church of the 1980s and 1990s are already gone, forgotten history.

Many contemporary songs are hard to sing. Some songs are hard to sing because they require too great a vocal range. Some are hard to sing because the voices available in the average congregation cannot reach such heights or depths. Some songs are unpredictable and have harmonies that are hard to hear (most people sing ‘by ear’ in church). When I, as a music major, struggle with the bass line as written, I am not surprised when others comment about songs that are hard to sing. Song leaders make it even more difficult when they do not pitch the song in the correct key – songs are written in a certain key for a reason! Some of the songs are so difficult that even the song leader has not mastered all of the parts. I recently heard a comment made by a brother who has in times past led singing very capably. Referring to a song leader who wanted the help of a praise team, he said, “If I didn’t know the song, I would have some folks helping me too.”

Many contemporary songs have poor lyrics. Singing without instruments should cause one to think about the words. How often do we read lyrics and think, “We would never speak that way!” Some songs reflect elementary school speech and grammar but still appeal to an undiscerning consumer-driven market. Some lyrics are not theologically sound. Yet, new songs get passed along from one church to another, with no one pausing to ask, “Is this good? biblical? helpful?” Sometimes the words have little meaning. Perhaps we think that if we sing them with heart and passion, we can overlook the fundamentally flawed lyrics of newer songs.

There is too much repetition, both in lyrics and music. Repetition is built into many songs, and as though the repetition that already exists were not enough, we have learned to repeat the song and then to repeat the last phrase half a dozen times (to make sure that everyone gets the point?)

Some of the problems that exist in *a cappella* churches

While I could write at length about each of the items in this list, I restrain myself. Most of the points are self-obvious.

- Songs that lack good lyrics, songs that lack good music, songs that lack both
- Songs that are overly repetitive

- Songs in which some of the parts (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) are impossible to sing for the average person
- Trying to adapt and sing popular presentation music at the congregational level
- Trying to adapt songs that were written with instrumental accompaniment for *a cappella* use
- Trying to sing songs that were written for listening, not for singing
- Songs that are hard to sing (for a variety of reasons)
- Songs that do not contribute to the biblical goals and purpose of the assembly
- Songs that lack theological depth or correctness
- Disconnected lyrics thrown together; lyrics that are almost nonsensical

Three suggestions for songwriters and song leaders

Here are three simple suggestions for songwriters and song leaders.

Start by looking at the list above – avoid overmuch repetition, check for sing-ability, understand the purpose of congregational singing in the assembly of the church.

Focus on the lyrics. Good lyrics are essential to good songs. Do not just write or choose songs with pretty sounding lyrics. Show the lyrics to others -- to those with a theological education and an understanding of correct English grammar. Use poetic license, but check for glaring grammatical errors. Write lyrics that have meaning beyond simply fitting into a fixed syllabic space. Song leaders: sing songs with good lyrics.

Understand the factors of melody, harmony, range, and sing-ability that are part of good music. Write good music that matches the lyrics and supports the message of the song. Song leaders: sing songs with good music.